

THE LATE LAMENTED

BY FREDRIC BROWN

SHE MEANT
TROUBLE →
TROUBLE
I COULDN'T
RESIST. BUT
I HADN'T
COUNTED
ON DOUBLE
MURDER.

A BANTAM



MYSTERY



THE LATE LAMENTED

Fredric Brown

Copyright © 1959

OceanofPDF.com

THIS LOW-PRICED BANTAM BOOK printed in completely new type, especially designed for easy reading, contains the complete text of the original, hard-cover edition. NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

THE LATE LAMENTED

A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

Dutton edition published February 1959 Bantam edition published January 1960

A shortened version of this book appeared in the February issue of THE SAINT DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, © 1958 by King-Size Publications, Inc.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection With a review written for inclusion in a magazine, news-paper or broadcast.

Copyright © 1959 by Fredric Brown

All rights reserved. Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada.

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc. Its trade-mark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a bantam, is registered in the U. S. Patent Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada, Printed in the United States of America. Bantam Books, Inc., 25 West 45th Street, New York 36, New York.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

My uncle said, “Gin, Ed,” and put down his cards. “Do I make enough points to win the game?”

I added my unmatched cards and nodded. “Big game too. I wasn’t on board.” I added up the figures. “Four hundred thirty-eight dollars. Making the cumulative total—let’s see; I owe you eight thousand six hundred twenty-two. You’re really getting into me, Uncle Am.”

It was big money if it had meant anything, but of course it didn’t. We kept score at a dollar a point, just for the hell of it. Whenever one of us got ten thousand dollars in debt to the other he paid off by standing a treat in a good restaurant, one of those we couldn’t afford to eat in regularly, and afterwards a show, if there was one playing in Chicago that we wanted to see, or else some not too expensive night club that had good entertainment. That washed out the ten thousand dollar debt and we started over on our gin rummy scoring. The score hit the ten thousand dollar level only every couple of months, not too often for us to afford an evening on the town.

Uncle Am looked at his watch. “Want to go out and eat, kid, or should we have another game first?”

I was just about to vote in favor of another game—I wasn’t hungry yet—when the phone rang. Uncle Am picked it up and said, “Hunter and Hunter Detective Agency.”

And then said, “Wait a minute, Ben. Ed’s here too; let him get on the extension phone and listen in so we won’t have to do this twice. Okay?”

And he nodded to me and I went into the outer office and headed for the extension phone on the desk there. But before I pick it up let me tell you who the Hunters are; who Ben is will come out in the telling.

I’m Ed Hunter, middle twenties. Ambrose Hunter, middle forties—shortish, stoutish, and smartish—is my father’s brother and my only surviving relative. He’d been a carney for a lot of years. After my father died when I was eighteen I’d gone with the carney and worked with Uncle Am for a couple of seasons. Then we’d broken with the carney and had come back to Chicago. Uncle Am had been a private detective once before he’d been a carney and he got a job with Ben Starlock. Ben runs a fair-sized detective agency, with office help and usually ten to a dozen operatives. After a little while, after I was twenty-one Uncle Am had talked Ben into taking me on as an operative too. We’d both worked for Ben a few years, had got a little

money ahead, and had decided to take the gamble of starting our own agency, Hunter & Hunter. That was a couple of years ago; we'd lost money for a while, then broken even; now we were in the black, not getting rich but getting by.

And we'd stayed friendly with Ben Starlock; once in a while when he had more jobs on hand than he had operatives, he threw some work our way. And vice versa. Running a private detective agency is like that. For days or even weeks on end you've got almost nothing to do and then you suddenly need more operatives than you've got, whether-you're a big outfit like Starlock's or a two-man partnership like Hunter & Hunter. Almost every agency has friendly relations with one or more others for such emergencies.

I sat down on a corner of the desk in the outer office—the desk which would be that of a stenographer-bookkeeper-receptionist if and when we ever got solvent enough to need one-and picked up the phone. I said, "Hi, Ben. We're three-way now. Shoot."

"You guys free?"

Uncle Am said, "No, Ben. We charge money. But we re not working at the moment, if that's what you mean.

Ben Starlock grunted. "One thing first. I may not be able to use you boys if the answer to one question is wrong. When were you up here in my agency last? Together or separately."

"It was together," Uncle Am said. "I'd guess about a month ago. Anyway that's the last time for me. I don't think Ed's been there by himself since then. Have you, Ed?"

"No," I said. "That's the last time. But I'd say five weeks ago, maybe six, instead of a month."

"Who was on at the receptionist's desk?"

I said, "The tall redhead. I don't know her name."

"Good." Starlock sounded relieved. "Can I see you boys in half an hour, both of you?"

"Sure," Uncle Am said. "Your office?"

"Hell, no. If you show up here, the deal's off. I'll come around to that hole in the wall of yours. So long."

Uncle Am looked at me when I went back to the doorway of the inner office. "Wonder what the hell that part's about?"

I leaned against the side of the doorway. I said, "You're not thinking, Uncle Am. It adds up only one way. Somebody in his office is involved in whatever he wants us to do and he doesn't want him to see us. And. the somebody has worked there only a month or so or he'd have seen us already."

Uncle Am nodded. "You mean she'd have seen us already. It has to be a replacement for the redhead on the reception desk. He wasn't sure whether we'd do for the job until he learned the redhead was still working there last time we were in." He relighted his cigar, which had gone out during the phone call. "Well, no use our wasting our brains deducing things he'll tell us soon

anyway. Half an hour's just about time for one more gin game. Okay?"

I said, "I'd better not. Got to send out a check for the rent and one for the phone bill. I'd better do it now in case this job's something we got to start on right away."

I went back to the outer office desk and got busy. I got the checks ready to mail and then found a few other little things to do to keep busy or at least look busy when Starlock came.

I went into the inner office and we gave him the seat of honor, the client's chair. Uncle Am asked him, "How's business, Ben?"

"Lousy. I've got four ops sitting on their tails in the back room right now. But you boys are smart enough to have guessed why I can't use my own ops."

"Sure," Uncle Am said. "How long has she worked for you? About a month?"

"Just about. But for only two more days; she's given notice that she's leaving Saturday."

"And what do you suspect her of? Not stealing postage stamps. Information from your files maybe?"

Starlock shook his head. He smiled and looked like a benign Buddha, as he always does when he smiles. He's a big man with just the right build for a Buddha, and he even has a mole in the middle of his forehead to carry out the illusion.

He said, "I don't suspect her of anything. Particularly of rifling my files, since she doesn't have access to them. No, Am, I've got a client who's interested in her. He thinks she may know where forty-six thousand dollars is hidden. Have you read news stories on the Jason Rogers case?"

"Name sounds familiar. But ask Ed; he's the one with the long memory around here. If he read about it he can probably quote you the whole thing."

Starlock looked at me. "Did you read it, Ed? And how much do you remember?"

I said, "It was out in Freeland. You still live out there yourself, Ben?"

Starlock nodded. Freeland is a small city just outside of Cook County. It's not exactly a suburb of Chicago and it's politically independent, but a lot of people who work in Chicago live there, and commute.

I said, "Jason Rogers was City Treasurer of Freeland. A couple of months ago—"

"Six weeks," Ben interrupted me. "Go ahead. I'll correct you if you're wrong on anything."

"Six weeks ago he was killed—run down by a car. I don't remember details of the accident, but I don't think it was a hit-run."

"It wasn't. Go on."

"Well, apparently he was pretty well known and liked out there and he'd been treasurer for quite a while—How long, Ben?"

"Thirteen years. It's an elective office, every second year, and he'd been elected seven straight times. The last two times he was unopposed. He was

halfway through his seventh term when he was killed.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Anyway he was well thought of. There was a nice obit on him and a eulogizing editorial. He was the late lamented Jason Rogers—until a week later. Then an audit they took incident to turning over the books to his assistant showed a shortage. But it doesn’t seem to me the figure was quite forty-six grand.”

Starlock said, “It wasn’t, at first. I think the first estimate was thirty-five. But they found a few more discrepancies. Forty-six is the real total. Remember anything else, Ed?”

“Only survivor was a daughter. I don’t remember the name. Do I guess right that she’s now working in your office?”

“You do. Wanda Rogers. And our client is Waukegan Indemnity; they bonded Jason Rogers for fifty thousand, so they’re stuck with paying off the whole forty-six—if the courts eventually decide he was guilty of the embezzlement. That may take a long time, but the bonding company is worrying plenty about it meanwhile. That’s a hell of a chunk of cash for them to pay out.”

“Isn’t there evidence one way or the other?”

“Not that they’ve found yet. Auditors are still working on the books, but some things are missing and it’s going to be difficult to prove absolutely that he did it—or that anybody else did it. But he was in charge and it would have been tough for anybody else to have got away with that much and kept it from him. So, since there’s a strong presumption that way, the courts may decide that the bonding company is liable. They’d like to be able to prove he didn’t take it—or find the money if he did take it and had it cached somewhere. Either one.”

“They think that if he took it he cached it and didn’t spend it. And that his daughter knows where it is?”

“I’ll take one of those at a time, Ed. About caching it—he probably did, if he took it. He made ten thousand a year and his scale of living was well within it. Of course he could have lost it gambling, but he wasn’t known to be a gambling man, even with his own money. As far as anyone knows he didn’t know a roulette wheel from a tote board. No, if he took it he was stashing it, probably with the intention of taking a runout powder and living in South America or somewhere the rest of his life. And it would have been within two weeks of the time he was killed, if that was the case.”

“How do you know that?” Uncle Am asked.

“That’s when a regular annual audit—by an outside firm—was due, and any shortage would have shown up then. The last audit, a year before, showed okay. So the money vanished since then.”

“And before his death? Couldn’t someone—whoever took over his job when he died but before the audit was made, and worked fast, knowing he’d be blamed?”

“No. The audit started the day after his death—the auditing firm happened

to have men free and there was no use waiting. But something like that takes time and it wasn't for about a week that they came up with the shortage. And the books weren't being worked on meanwhile."

I said, "Okay, so let's assume he took it, and cached it. What reason do they have for thinking the daughter, Wanda, was in on it and knows where the money is? An embezzler doesn't usually confide in his family what he's doing."

"Right. But with that much money involved he might have wanted his daughter to get the money in case something happened to him—as something did happen—before the operation was completed. And that's something that easily could have happened in this case—I'm not saying I think it did; I'm saying it could have—because of one thing that came out in the investigation.

"Jason Rogers' lawyer, for what personal legal work he had, was John Carstairs, a friend of his. His will was in Carstairs' safe. And a few months before his death he also gave Carstairs a sealed envelope addressed to his daughter with instructions that it be delivered to her in case of his death. Carstairs gave it to her the day after Rogers was killed—and she opened it in his presence, but didn't read it to him. It could have told her where money was hidden."

"What was her story about what it did say? I presume she was questioned about it?"

"Oh, sure. A week later, after the shortage came to light. And her story makes sense, that it concerned his funeral and where he wanted to be buried. And that she followed his wishes in arranging the funeral, but didn't keep the note. So she didn't have proof that's what it was, and it's just a question of her word against the other possibility."

"Uh-huh," I said. "You pay your money and take your choice. One more question before we get to what you want us to do. How come she got a job with you? Just coincidence? And how come she had to go to work so after her father's death? Didn't he leave her some of estate, with a ten grand a year income?" "He left an estate—not much, but a few thousand plus an equity in the small house they lived in. Maybe ten thousand altogether, after the house is sold to settle the estate. But it's going to be frozen in probate for a while—longer than usual under the circumstances. Because if he's judged guilty of embezzling the money and if the money itself isn't found, the estate will be claimed as partial restitution. Carstairs is the executor, and the City Attorney warned him not to give Wanda even any advances out of it until things are settled. And since she didn't have any money or property in her own name that left her out on a limb, until and unless.

"Now about how she got a job with me. I'd met her—twice, I think. I knew her father, very slightly. About six months ago I joined the country club at Freeland. He was already a member. I don't go around very often, but we met there. One Sunday I was in a golf foursome with him. And—yes, it was twice that I ran into him there with his daughter and he introduced us the first time.

Maybe she got the impression that he and I knew one another better than we did.

“Anyway, about ten days after her father’s death—about three days after the start of the scandal—she came in my office one day looking for a job. I imagine—I’m just guessing—she’d seen some others of her father’s friends first, ones he knew better, but they hadn’t done anything for her. Either because they didn’t have any jobs open or because—well, because they believed her father was really an embezzler and didn’t want to hire his daughter. But Jennifer—that’s the tall redhead you mentioned—had just given notice and I was really looking for a receptionist, and she seemed qualified. What the hell, why not, as long as I needed a girl. I don’t believe in hereditary tendencies toward crime, so even if her father was guilty—and I was a long way from being sure he was—I didn’t see why she should be penalized for that.”

“Even if she knew where the money was?” Uncle Am asked. “And if she needed a job for only a short while till it was safe for her to get at it?”

Starlock rubbed his chin. “At that time I didn’t know about the sealed letter her father had left for her. It hadn’t come out in the papers—never did, in fact. I learned about it for the first time from my client this morning. Maybe that would have made me stop to think. But not knowing about it, I felt sure that if her father was guilty, she didn’t know about it.”

“And how come,” I asked, “Waukegan Indemnity came to you to investigate her? Coincidence, or because they thought you had an in, since she worked for you?”

“Not exactly either. They were keeping track of her, of course, knew where she worked. And this morning the manager of their Freeland office, guy named Koslovsky, came to see me to ask questions about her—”

“Giving his right name and company to the receptionist?” Uncle Am cut in.

Starlock grinned at him. “These insurance boys know their stuff. He phoned me at home last night and made an appointment, came around to my house before I left this morning.

“Anyway, I told him what little I could—just what I’ve been telling you—about her and her father. And he asked if I wanted to take over the job on her. Naturally I can use business—even if it’s business I have to pass on to guys like you and settle for my cut. So I said sure and we made the deal. He couldn’t do it himself, and anyway he’s busy on the Freeland end—working with the auditors and cops there.”

“What does he want done, a roping job?” I asked.

“Right, but there’ll be a tailing job first. Here’s how I figure it. Am can pick her up when she leaves work tonight and see how she spends her evenings, where all she goes, that sort of thing. He’ll learn enough about her—maybe in one evening, maybe it’ll take longer—her habits and habitats, so you, Ed, will be able to pick the right time and place to get to know her. And it’ll be mostly your job from there—although maybe Am can take over some

tailoring again from time to time, evenings when you're not dating her. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "Anyway, I'll try. If I fall flat on my face the first time I try to make a pick-up, though, it'll be rough to keep trying."

"He won't, Ben," Uncle Am said. "You say she's quitting you for another job. Where is it?"

"With Marshall Field's, starting Monday, as a model. Or so she told me. Come to think of it I can verify that with a phone call, and I will. I'll let you boys know if it's a phony. She told me she was awfully sorry to quit after having worked so short a time but that she'd been offered a modeling job and it paid ten dollars a week more so she Couldn't afford to turn it down. And I admitted she couldn't—there's not much if any chance for my advancing my office help or paying them much more. With me, it'd have been a couple of years, maybe more, before I could have given her that much of a raise."

Uncle Am looked at me and grinned. "If she's pretty enough to be a model, Ed, sounds like your job won't be too dull."

"She's more than pretty," Starlock said. "Want the rest of the description?"

"Shoot," Uncle Am said.

"Twenty-two years old. Five feet four, about a hundred fifteen pounds, chestnut hair in a loose bob—maybe bobs are out of date but this one is perfect for her—blue eyes, creamy skin. Doesn't wear any makeup except lipstick. Good figure—not too much, but enough. Graceful carriage and walk.

"And today—you'll spot her mostly by clothes the first time, Am—she's wearing, from the bottom up, dull-finish black pumps with cuban heels, suntan colored nylons, skirt with a complicated check pattern in two shades of green and some brown, but it'll look green from a distance, and a plain tan blouse. But that'll be covered by a tan shortie coat, about hip length, when you see her coming out of the building. No hat."

"That's plenty," Uncle Am said. "And she'll be coming out of the building entrance at five o'clock or shortly after."

"Right. You pick her up there. Oh, she doesn't live out at Freeland; the house out there is empty. She took a room close in, on the near north side. Address is one eighty-six West Covent Place. That's about a dozen blocks from the office; I don't know whether she usually walks it or takes the bus. But she doesn't have a car, so you don't need to worry about that angle."

"Telephone number? Or do you know her room number at the Covent address?"

Starlock said, "We've got a telephone number in our card file, but I didn't bother to copy it down or remember it. You won't need it for the tail job, Am. And if Ed can't get it for himself, he won't be able to use it anyway. No, no room number. I don't know the building, but I know the neighborhood and what kind of building it would be, and probably the rooms wouldn't be numbered."

He pulled a folded paper out of his pocket and put it on the desk. "Here's the application blank she filled out when I hired her. Not much on it besides

what I've told you already—nothing at all that will help you, Am, with the tail job. But Ed might pick up a detail or two that will help him later.” He looked at his wrist watch. “Well, I've got to run. Two o'clock appointment at the office, and I'll just make it.”

“One more question, Ben,” Uncle Am said. “How much time is authorized on this? Mostly I want to know whether we'll have to push on Ed's getting acquainted or whether we can wait till we find a sure-fire setup.”

“Client authorized a week. That is, a week's time for one man. I can talk him into stretching it if we're starting to get results by then. If Ed's really getting to know her well. If no results by then, that's it. Well, so long, boys.”

When he'd left, Uncle Am said, “Well, kid. We'd better eat. Shall we go together this time?”

Usually we staggered our lunch times so one or the other of us would be in the office ready to answer the telephone or talk to a client who might drop in instead of phoning.

I shook my head. “You go first, Uncle Am. I might as well stick around. You're working tonight, but I won't be. Maybe won't be for days. And when I start, you'll be free. We can still take work, if any comes.”

“Okay, kid. If you're more hungry for money than for grub, I'll go first.”

CHAPTER TWO

It was a good thing I stayed. He'd been gone only a minute when the phone rang and it turned out to be a job. It was Clyde Moore, manager of a small finance company that occasionally gave us work. It was always tough work, usually impossible, because they had an investigator on their own staff who always tried first. When he failed they sometimes let us take a crack, and we sometimes succeeded. But we always knew that someone had tried all the obvious things before us, and that the references had been alerted.

This was the case of one Walter Pfleuger, a bartender, whose purchase of a car they'd financed. He still owed them four hundred dollars on it and hadn't made a payment in three months; they were ready to repossess if they found him. But they'd found out that he'd been fired from his job at a tavern on Wabash and had moved from the hotel he'd been living at, the Melvern on State Street. Moore read me the information that had been on his application for the loan on the car and I made notes of all of it. There wasn't an awful lot. I didn't have to ask him whether the references it gave had already been tried. I just asked, "How much time, Clyde?"

"A day. That's all we want to gamble on it."

I told him okay and hung up, studied the notes I'd made, and thought a while. He'd worked at his last known job at the Golden Bar for two years; his employment record showed the past five, which included three taverns. The oldest was the Wheel, at which he'd up to four years ago, as of the time of the application; his employer's name was given as Gus Simmons. And of the two personal references he'd given one was a named Sidney Appleman, whom he'd known only three years; the other one had known him for ten. Appleman wouldn't have known him while he worked at the Wheel. Appleman's address and phone number were given. The address was nowhere near that of the Wheel—one was on the north side of town and the other on the south—so he probably didn't frequent the place or know Gus Simmons.

I called the phone number. It wasn't too likely he'd be home in midafternoon, but it didn't cost anything to try and besides I could learn when he would be there. But he was home; he answered the phone himself.

"Sid Appleman?" I asked, and when he said yeah I said, "You don't know me. My name is Gus Simmons."

"Who?"

"Gus Simmons. I run a tavern on the south side called the Wheel. Wally Pfleuger ever mention me to you?"

“He said he’d worked at—Yeah, I guess he mentioned your name too. Anyway the Gus part. Why?”

“I got a job for him—probably a better one than he’s got now if he’s working—but I can’t find him. Moved from the Melvern a couple of months ago, they tell me. And—here’s how I come to have your name and phone—I ran into him three months ago and told him I might have a good job for him soon. He was plenty interested, but he said he might be quitting at the Golden Bar, that’s where he was working then, pretty soon and might be moving from the Melvern too. Gave me your name and said if I couldn’t get him otherwise you’d tell me. So where is he?”

“Listen—uh—Gus. He’s in a little trouble, asked me not to give anybody any dope about him. He—”

I didn’t let him finish. “Trouble? Hell, then the deal’s off so you can forget it. I don’t want to hire anybody who—”

“Wait a minute. I don’t mean real trouble. Just with a finance company. He ain’t wanted, for Christ’s sake. But he asked me—Listen, a guy from the finance company was here only a couple of days ago. How do I know you’re who you say you are, not somebody else with the same outfit?”

I chuckled. “That kind of trouble Wally always was in, off and on. That don’t worry me, Appleman. But about who I am. Look, I’ll hang up if you want me to; you call back—I’m at the Wheel right now—and I’ll answer the phone.”

“What’s the number?”

“I might give you the number of the finance company I work for. Don’t be stupid. Look it up in the book. Okay?”

“Oh, hell, I guess you’re Gus or you wouldn’t want me to do that. Okay, I’ll tell you where Wally is. Fourteen-oh-six West Madison. I got the phone number somewhere; want me to look it up; want to call him now?”

“Would he be home now? Maybe I could call him at work and save you hunting. No hurry on this.”

“Sure, you could get him at work this evening, Gus. Starts at five. Joint called Jerry’s Place, on Halsted near Chicago Avenue. I don’t know the number there either, but you could find it in the book. It’s a lousy dive and a lousy job—a winos’ hangout. He’ll be glad to get a break and get out of it.”

“Okay, Sid,” I said. “Thanks a lot.”

I put down the phone and called Clyde Moore back. I told him Walter Pfleger’s current home address and place of employment.

He said, “My God, Ed, that was less than half an hour. You must have done it without leaving the office.”

“Sure,” I said, “but it’ll cost you half a day’s time just the same. Our minimum charge. And don’t ask me how I did it because the next time you wouldn’t have to call us.”

He laughed and we said good-by and hung up.

I reached for the application blank Wanda Rogers had made out for her job

with Starlock and was just starting to read it over when Uncle Am came back.

“Okay, Ed,” he said. “You can go now. Feed your face.”

I went and fed my face and when I came back Uncle Am said, “No excitement. Some more gin rummy?”

I said, “I’ve got to write a report and send out a bill for half a day’s time. I’d better do that first.”

“Half a day’s time? What for?”

I said, “I earned it during the half hour you were eating.” And told him briefly what had happened.

He laughed. “You should have waited till tomorrow noon to call him back and billed him for a full day—and some expenses. Hell, kid, you’re too honest to be a detective.”

“You’d have done it the same way. If only because showing off by calling him back that quick is worth half a day’s time. Besides, you’re getting honest yourself.”

“Guess I am. Hell of a state for an ex-carney, isn’t it? But hell, play some gin rummy first anyway. I’ve got to leave at half past four to take up my station outside Starlock’s office building, and you’re going to keep the office open till five anyway. That half hour’ll give you time for the report and bill. Unless you can earn another half day’s time in it, and then you can stay over to do it.”

That made sense so we played gin again until half past four, and I won back three thousand four hundred and seventy dollars.

But I didn’t earn another half day’s time during the last half hour. No one called and nothing happened except that I wrote my report for the finance company—just a brief one to the effect that I had learned Pfleuger’s current address and place of employment from “an informant,” and giving them, just for the record, although I had already given them to Moore over the phone and like as not they already had the car repossessed by now. I made out a bill for half a day’s time and an envelope for the report and bill and entered the charge on our books. By then it was five o’clock. Looking around before closing up I saw the employment application of Wanda Rogers and put it in my pocket to look at sometime during the evening.

I had no plans otherwise and, since I’d had lunch so late, I wasn’t going to be hungry for another couple of hours, so I wasn’t in any hurry. I walked to the window and stood looking out for a while.

Not that there was anything to look at except an alley. Our office is in a fair location, on Wabash just north of the Loop, but it’s in an old five-story building and it’s at the back on the top floor. Our view is of the windowless back of a six-story warehouse across the alley. If you stand very close to the window and look up you can see a little sky, not much.

The sky was dull and gray and a faint drizzle of rain was starting. I hoped it wouldn’t rain hard, because Uncle Am hadn’t worn or taken a raincoat. But he’d be better off than his quarry at that; Starlock had said Wanda Rogers

hadn't worn a hat and he hadn't mentioned an umbrella. Uncle Am at least was hatted; he always wears a black slouch hat outdoors and most of the time indoors. I've tried to get him to buy a better-looking one but he won't; he sticks to that old black hat almost as though he's superstitious about it. Maybe he is.

I put on the spare raincoat I keep at the office and my own hat, took the elevator down, and went out into the drizzle. Our rooming house on Huron is only ten blocks from the office and we usually walk in good weather; tonight I took the bus. But the drizzle had stopped by the time I got off it.

I went up to our room. We share a big double room with two beds at the second floor front. It's nothing fancy but, except for sleeping, we don't spend a hell of a lot of time in it.

But tonight I was going to spend the evening there. It would have been a good night for me to try to get a date—with me free and Uncle Am working—but I wasn't in the mood for one, and anyway I'd had dates two nights out of the last three and both of them had been disappointing; I was sour on women and probably would stay that way for another day or two.

I got out my trombone, polished it up, and ran a few scales and arpeggios, softly. I never try any fortissimos, but it isn't every rooming house where nobody complains if you play a trombone even softly, so I don't push my luck.

Then I put a Brubeck-Desmond record on the player and for a while played along with it, following Desmond's sax—an octave lower whenever he got into his instrument's higher range. I did pretty well at it. Then in the fourth band of the record—it's an L.P.—there's quite a stretch where Desmond sits out and Dave Brubeck's piano takes it solo, mostly tricky chord progressions. I tried to play along there and do my own improvising instead of following Desmond's—and the result was dismal; I got too far out and couldn't get back. I gave up and put my trombone back in the case while I listened to the rest of the record and let Desmond do the rest of the work.

Then I looked around for something new to read and find anything, so I decided I might as well go out and eat and get it over with. I did, and picked up a newspaper and a few paperback novels on my way back to the room.

I went through the newspaper first but there wasn't anything in it about Rogers or Freeland; the case was dead newswise now until and unless the money was found or the question of whether or not Jason Rogers was to be held responsible for it came to court.

Then I made myself comfortable with one of the novels and I was somewhere in the second chapter when I heard the phone ring in the hallway downstairs. I didn't think it would be for me, but I quit reading and listened and a moment later I heard the voice of Mrs. Brady, our landlady, calling out. "Ed! Ed Hunter! You home, Ed?"

By that time I had the door open and called back that I was coming. She was back in her own apartment by the time I got downstairs and answered the

phone.

“Ed”—it was Uncle Am’s voice—“listen. Our subject just went into the Park Theater. She’ll be in there at least an hour and a half, even if she sees only one of the movies—it’s a double feature. I’ll go in myself rather than stand around outside that long but first I’m calling from a drugstore across the street. Meanwhile you get dressed, if you aren’t, and—”

I interrupted him. “Are you crazy, Uncle Am? I can’t pick her up in a movie—or anyway the odds would be against it; she’s a respectable girl. And if I try and miss, the whole operation is a bust because she’ll know my face by then and no matter where I run into her—”

Uncle Am interrupted ‘me. “Shut up and listen, kid. Of course I don’t expect you to try something as silly as that. *But* she went home first and I got a look at the joint where she rooms. Remember the address?”

“Sure,” I said. “One eighty-six West Covent Place.”

“Well, if you get there fast, you may get a break. There’s a Room for Rent sign in the window. Throw some stuff into a suitcase, grab a taxi, and get there quick before someone else nabs off that room. But don’t dawdle. Rooms go fast these—”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Don’t waste my time. Hang up so I can phone a cab before I start packing.”

He hung up and I called for a cab to come right away and then ran back up to our room. I put my shoes and necktie and suit coat back on, then opened a suitcase on the bed and started tossing things into it. It didn’t matter what I put in; I could always come back any time to get anything I missed, like my razor and shaving cream. In fact I didn’t waste time going down the hall to the bathroom to get them. All I had to do was fill the suitcase enough so it wouldn’t rattle.

I took a pile of shirts from the dresser drawer—and uncovered something that had been under them. My revolver and shoulder holster. After a moment’s hesitation I put in. There wasn’t a chance in a thousand that I’d be needing a revolver, but you can’t tell. With forty-six grand stake there might be others interested besides the cops the bonding company, and if so those others might rough customers. Anyway, there was nothing to lose—I thought—and they would give the suitcase a little more freight.

I was just closing the suitcase when a horn honked out front and I knew the taxi was there. I was in it, and off, a minute later.

The Room for Rent sign was still in the window where Uncle Am had seen it, and I relaxed. The building was red brick; three stories high and not very wide. It was older than I was—probably twice as old. But it had been neatly kept up. It was set back about ten feet from the sidewalk and there was even grass in those ten feet on both sides of the walk that led to the door. There were no steps; the ground floor was really a ground floor. It had probably been built as a single-family residence fifty years or so ago, subsequently been made into three flats and then later into a rooming house. I guessed

there'd be about five rooms to each floor, fifteen rooms in all.

There wasn't any bell outside the door so I walked in. There was a fairly wide hallway leading back to a flight of steps and there was a coin telephone on the wall near the foot of the stairs. Halfway down the hallway there was a table, with incoming mail—a few letters and circulars lying on it—and a pushbutton in the wall behind it, a sign over the button reading "Ring for Landlady."

I went back to the table and put down my suitcase. Since no one was watching me I glanced at the letters first, but none of them was for Wanda Rogers. Of course she'd been home since work and would have picked up her mail, if so I hadn't expected to find a letter for her. Then I pushed the button to Ring for Landlady. She came out of the door of the back room. A big bleached blonde battle-ax of a woman, somewhere in her forties. She looked tough enough to handle any obstreperous roomers without having to call copper to get help. She looked as though she could be, or could have been, the madam of a house of ill fame. In other words, a typical Chicago landlady. Our landlady, Mrs. Brady, is an exception—a small birdlike woman who wouldn't know how to go about being tough; she gets by only by being awfully particular about choosing her tenants so she doesn't have to keep them in line.

She saw my suitcase and asked, "Looking for a room?"

"Yes," I said. "I saw your sign. Hope it's still vacant."

"It is. The front room there." She walked past me and opened the door of it. Stood aside so I could go in. But she said, "Ten bucks a week," so I'd be discouraged and not waste her time by looking at it if that was too much for me.

I went past her into the room and flicked on the light switch; she stayed in the doorway. It wasn't too bad a room, although seven or eight bucks would have been a fairer price, and I might have got it for eight or nine if I dickered. But I didn't want to dicker, especially as it was ideally located for my purpose. From the window I could see anybody who came and left, and with my door ajar I'd probably be able to hear most of the telephone conversations on that wall phone.

"I'll take it, I guess," I said, trying not to sound too enthusiastic about it. I took out my wallet and found a ten-dollar bill, handed it to her.

She took it, but didn't move. She said, "I'm not fussy, but I got a few rules. No noise or music after ten. That's one of them."

I felt like asking her, for the hell of it, if she wouldn't mind if I played trombone, but I didn't.

"No cooking in rooms. Not even coffee. But I give breakfast to people that don't want to go out for it, Three dollars a week—that's for six breakfasts; I don't do it on Sunday. Any time you want to eat from seven to nine. You want breakfasts?"

I hesitated. I didn't, really, but it occurred to me that Wanda just might have her breakfasts here and so it would be a good chance to get acquainted

with her. So I said, "Well—I don't know about permanently, especially because I don't know what hours I'll be working. But I'll try it the first week." And I dug out my wallet again and took three singles out of it.

She took them. "There's a bathroom on each floor. On this floor it's the third door down the hall. Door's painted white, so you can't miss it. And there are two rules about bathrooms. One is, be sure you lock the door when you're it. I've got ladies and gentlemen rooming here and I don't want nobody embarrassed walking in."

"I'll lock the door," I said.

"Other rule is no baths between six and nine in the morning. That's when most of my tenants are getting ready to go to work and if somebody holds up the bathroom taking baths then, they can make somebody else late for work."

"Okay," I said. "Any other rules?"

"Guess that's all. I'm Mrs. Czerny. I'll have to have your name to put on the receipt."

"Hunter," I said. "Ed Hunter. But you needn't bother with a receipt. Isn't Czerny a Czech name? You don't look like a Czech."

"My husband was," she said. And added unemotionally, "Damn him." She started away and then turned back. I'll bring you a receipt anyway. I always make a receipt and keep a carbon. That way nobody gets mixed up as to how far anybody's paid or when the next rent's due." And then, as though the mention of the next rent made her think of it, she said, "You said you didn't know what hours you'd be working, Mr. Hunter. Does that mean you're not working now?"

"I just got into Chicago—from Gary. But I won't have any trouble finding a job, Mrs. Czerny. And anyway I've got enough to last me a while, even if I don't."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a printer," I told her.

"My husband was a printer," she said. And again added unemotionally, "Damn him."

It must have been a ritual, the adding of those two words every time she mentioned her husband or ex-husband. This time she turned and kept going, so I was able to grin while I wondered what her husband had been like, and whether he was dead or divorced. I followed her out into the hallway and brought back my suitcase. I closed the door and started unpacking, putting things into the dresser drawers and the closet. This time, since I was in no hurry, I checked what I'd used to fill the suitcase and decided I had enough of everything to last me at least a week. Except my toilet articles; I'd have to go back to pick them up. And a bathrobe; I'd want one in case I had to go to the bathroom down the hall in the middle of the night.

Mrs. Czerny came back just as I was finishing and brought me my receipt for thirteen dollars. But she didn't stay to talk.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was eight o'clock, only half an hour

after Uncle Am's phone call. Probably it would be a couple of hours before Wanda came home, but then again the movie could be a stinker that she'd walk out on if she had good taste, and I didn't want to take a chance of missing getting a look at her as she came in.

I put a chair—there was one straight chair and one over-stuffed one in the room and I picked the overstuffed one—in position in front of my window and tried it. Yes, I'd be able to see anyone who turned in, through the thin curtain.

I set my door a bit ajar. The hallways and the stairs were uncarpeted. and by listening to footsteps I'd be able to tell at least approximately which room Wanda went to when she came in, particularly if it was on the first floor. By counting steps starting as they passed my door I'd be able to tell pretty accurately how much farther she'd gone.

Then I got comfortable in the chair and took up my vigil. I wished now that I'd thought to ask Uncle Am when he'd called me whether she'd changed clothes or coat when she'd come home before going to the movie, whether she'd added a hat or carried an umbrella. But I wasn't really worried about not being able to identify her. There probably wouldn't be another girl living here who'd come even close to her age-height-weight description and she couldn't have changed those factors.

After a while I remembered that I still had her application blank for the Starlock job in my pocket and realized this would be as good a time as any to study it, as long as I didn't let it distract me from my watching. I got it out and unfolded it.

There wasn't much on it that Starlock hadn't already told me. It was a standard application blank—Starlock doesn't hire enough people to have ones of his own printed—and, aside from the usual questions of age, sex, and what not, it had the usual spaces for employment record and references.

There wasn't any employment record; apparently her job with Starlock was the first one she'd ever held. After graduation from high school she'd taken a six-months business course—no doubt to qualify herself for a job in case of emergency, just the kind of emergency that had actually happened, and then had entered the Freeland Academy of Music and had attended it for two years. I wondered what instrument she played (maybe we could play duets?) and whether she was strictly longhair or liked progressive jazz too. Me, I like both but generally prefer listening to or trying to play jazz. In longhair, I go mostly for Stravinsky—but I don't try to play him on the trombone.

The references, all personal ones, were businessmen in Freeland, no doubt friends or acquaintances of her father. They wouldn't matter; she'd no doubt had to put them in because the form called for them, but Starlock already knew her and the circumstances about her; he wouldn't have called any of the references.

In the next couples of hours maybe a dozen people came in or went out or both; some of them were women but none could possibly have been Wanda.

She came and turned in the walk to the doorway and I didn't have the slightest doubt that it was she. She had changed coats, worn a raincoat instead of the shortie, but she didn't wear a hat or carry an umbrella; apparently she wasn't afraid of getting a little rain on her hair, and I liked that. It was beautiful chestnut hair, in a shoulder-length as Starlock had described it.

At that distance and through a curtain I couldn't see face too clearly, but I liked it. And even under a raincoat you could see that her hundred fifteen pounds was properly distributed over her five feet four inches. The door opened and closed and I could hear the click of her footsteps; they seemed to be heading toward the stairs but stopped before they got there. I was, by then, standing just inside my door to hear better and I heard the sound of the receiver being lifted off the wall telephone and then the sound of a dime being put into it.

And a moment's silence and then her voice. A nice voice, if a bit strained at the moment. Just loud enough for me to overhear, by trying hard. "This is the desk sergeant? My name is Wanda Rogers, one-eighty-six West Covent Place. Got that address down?"

"Well, I want to report that a man just followed me home from a movie. I don't know whether he went on when I came in or whether he's loitering outside, but I'll appreciate it if you'll radio your squad car that's nearest here and have them check...Description? He's about medium height, a little plump, has a mustache. He's wearing a brown suit and a black felt hat."

CHAPTER THREE

I swore to myself. She'd spotted Uncle Am. How, I didn't know; he's a damned good surveillance man. He'd almost never been spotted before on a tail job—and this was on the very first night of it. But I had to warn him; not knowing for sure whether or not I'd got the room he would loiter somewhere in the block, at least for a while until he felt reasonably sure the girl wasn't going out again.

I went through my door and the outer door and to the sidewalk and looked around. I saw him; there wasn't much cover in that block and he was standing in a shallow doorway on the other side of the street and a quarter of a block away. I walked a few steps toward him so I couldn't be seen from where Wanda was standing. I took a quick look around to make sure no one else was watching and then I made violent scrambling motions at Uncle Am. He stepped out of the doorway and headed off, walking fast.

To make the story I was going to tell look good, I passed the one-eighty-six doorway again and went a few yards in the other direction; then came back and went in.

Wanda was still on the phone. She was giving the telephone number. Then she said, "It's a rooming house. But I'll stay here near the phone till you call back, if you'll have your radio car check right away... Yes, I can identify him if they pick him up."

She hung up the receiver and turned to face me as I strolled back toward her along the hall.

"Excuse me," I said. "My door was ajar and I couldn't help hearing the call you just made. And I thought maybe I could be helpful—if there'd been a man outside I'd have held him till the police came. But there isn't anyone either loitering or walking anywhere in the block."

"Thank you," she said. She turned toward the phone then turned back. "But I guess it's too late to call it off now; they'll already have radioed the squad car, and besides—" She'd probably meant to say besides I might have missed seeing him and a squad car wouldn't, but that would have been impolite. "You shouldn't have taken a chance like that, though. What if he'd been there and was dangerous?"

I grinned a little. "I'm dangerous, too. By the way, my name is Ed Hunter. Just moved into the front room on this floor. And I heard you give your name as Wanda Rogers, I think. Was that right?"

She nodded. "Glad to know you, Mr. Hunter. And thanks again, but you

shouldn't have taken a chance like that."

"No trouble," I said. "If it ever happens again, or if there's ever anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to call on me. I'm home most of the time. Have you been rooming here long?"

"A little less than a month."

I said, "That Mrs. Czerny is quite a character, isn't she? Oh, by the way, how are the breakfasts here? If you take them, that is. I signed up for them for a week, but I don't know whether I'll keep on after that."

"I don't have breakfast here, so I don't know. I never have more than coffee and a roll or doughnut for breakfast anyway so it's cheaper for me to have that on the way to work."

I'd wasted my three dollars—unless the six breakfasts I had coming turned out to be worth it. I managed to keep her talking—about nothing or about the rooming house—until the phone rang a few minutes later, and she answered it. "Yes, this is Wanda Rogers. . . . Well, thank you for trying... Yes, I'm sure he followed me home, but he must have kept on going instead of waiting outside... I'll do that. Good-by and thanks again."

And then to me, "Good night, Mr. Hunter." And she went up the stairs and that was that. Which, I considered, was more than I'd expected or even hoped to accomplish my first evening here. At least I'd met her and established contact. Uncle Am's fluff had turned out to be a break for me after all.

I went back to my own room, but walked quietly so I could listen to the sound of footsteps overhead. They seemed to go the length of the hallway on the second floor and didn't start up another flight of stairs. Probably her room was the second floor front, directly over mine. Back in my room I felt surer of it when I heard someone moving around overhead; I hadn't heard any sounds from that direction until now.

I decided to read a while, maybe an hour, and then go home to see Uncle Am. Even if he was asleep and I had to wake him, I wanted to check with him and report to him what had happened. Also, I must admit, to razz him a bit for letting himself be spotted on his first night on a tail job, and then to reassure him that it had turned out for the best.

I got one of the pocket books—I'd tossed them into the suitcase to help fill it—and started reading.

It was very quiet (no noise or music after ten) and although I wasn't especially listening for anything I heard, half an hour later, the sound of a woman's heels coming down the stairs and along the hall. It wasn't likely to be Wanda—surely she wouldn't be going out again tonight—but if it was she, that was something I should know about, even though I couldn't take the risk of going out after her and following her. So I quickly went to the window and took my post there so I could spot whoever was leaving.

But nobody was leaving. The footsteps stopped outside my door, and there was a soft knock.

I went to the door and opened it; Wanda stood there; looking, I thought, a

little frightened. She'd changed to pajamas—but the housecoat she wore over them was at least as modest as a dress.

She said, "Mr. Hunter, you said if you could do me a favor—"

"Sure," I said. "Come in." And stepped back.

She came in and pushed the door partly shut, but not completely so, behind her. She said, "I think that man's again. I can't be absolutely sure, but I think there's someone in a doorway across the street and half a block east of here."

"Fine," I said. "I'll go see—" But I thought, surely Uncle Am wouldn't be silly enough to come back tonight after he knew I was here and after I'd once waved him off the surveillance. I reached for my suit coat and put it on. Because I'd intended to go out again anyway I hadn't undressed any farther than that.

"Wait," she said. "It's just this—I'm not sure enough to phone the police again, especially right after I gave them one false alarm. But I don't want you to take any chances, to try to hold him for them. Promise me you won't."

"All right," I said. "But if he sees me walking that way, it'll scare him off. Even if he's there now, he wouldn't be by the time you did phone the police again if I walk part-way there and then turn around and come back."

"But don't do it that way. Stay on this side of the street and don't even glance toward him except out of the corner of your eye. And go on past him—there's a drugstore on the corner of the next block; go in there and get a pack of cigarettes or something, and then come back, still on this side of the street. That's a natural enough thing to do, isn't it? And when you come back, if you say you've seen him, then I'll phone the police."

"Sure," I said. "You wait here." I gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and went out.

I walked the length of the block to the next corner, the drugstore, and didn't see anybody on either side of the She hadn't imagined Uncle Am the first time but this time she had imagined him, or had had an optical illusion of someone in a doorway where nobody was. But, imagination or illusion, I was getting a hell of a good break out of it; I was seeing a lot of Wanda Rogers tonight. I walked into my room and said, "Miss Rogers, there isn't—"

And stopped, just inside the doorway. Wanda Rogers was there, all right, sitting on the edge of my bed on the far side so that the bed was between us. But she had a gun in her hand, and the gun was aimed dead center at my solar plexus. The hand that held it was steady, and—worse—the gun was cocked. At that distance and with only the short trigger pull of a cocked revolver, she couldn't miss.

I didn't move.

The gun was my own, the one that had been in my shoulder holster in the dresser drawer, again under a pile of shirts. It was a short-barreled thirty-eight Police Positive and, at this short range, a howitzer wouldn't have been more dangerous.

I said, "Do you mind if I sit down?"

“Why?”

“Because if I sit down in that chair,” I glanced toward it but moved only my head, “I’ll be farther from you than I am now and especially if I’m sitting down you’ll be less worried about my making a grab for the gun. Not that I would anyway, but—”

“All right, sit down.” Her voice was perfectly calm. “But keep your hands where I can see them, on the arms of the chair.”

I moved sidewise to the chair and sat in it, carefully keeping my hands in sight. The gun moved with me.

I said, “Now, one more thing. That gun hasn’t exactly a hair trigger, but it takes only a very slight pull to shoot a cocked revolver; you could do it easily without intending to. If you decide to shoot me, all right, as long as you do it on purpose. But it would be a sad thing to have it happen accidentally. Would you mind moving it slightly off center, or uncocking it, one or the other? Either way, if I made a jump at you from this position, you’d have time to shoot twice.”

She didn’t uncock it, but the gun moved a little, just enough so it was aiming slightly to one side of me instead of dead center.

She said, “All right. Now talk. Who are you, Mr. Hunter?—if that’s really your name.”

“It’s really my name,” I said. “And you must have guessed that I’m a detective—and since you have guessed it, the jig is up and there’s no reason why I shouldn’t admit it. That ends my usefulness in this case—but so would your suspecting me, let alone your shooting me. Do you usually use guns on detectives? It’s much easier just to refuse to talk to them. Unless they’re police detectives, of course, and pull you in with a warrant and threaten to charge you with something if you don’t talk. I’m not a police detective, incidentally, but a private one. What made you suspect me of being a detective at all?”

“I don’t know whether you’re a detective at all; that’s the point. If you are, I suppose there’s nothing I can do about it. But if you’re not, I’m going to turn you over to the police. Right now.”

“What makes you think I might not be a detective, now that I admit I am?”

“Because other people besides detectives have been interested in me, Mr. Hunter. I guess they think that I know something about that missing forty-six thousand dollars. The house out in Freeland has been burglarized—and my room here was searched too.”

“Couldn’t the police have done that?”

“No. When the money was found to be missing, they came out and searched with a warrant, and did a thorough job. Why would they have tried again, as burglars?”

Apparently she’d begun to believe me, though. Either that or her arm was getting tired. The gun had dropped to the covers of the bed—but it was still cocked and still aimed in my general direction. She said, “Besides, I’ve been

followed—before tonight. Maybe by detectives, but how can I be sure?”

“Tonight’s little episode was. I can relieve your mind a little by telling you that.”

“You’re in cahoots with the man who followed me home from the movie tonight; that’s what made me suspicious of you. You heard me calling the police and went out to warn him off, didn’t you, before you came back to tell me nobody was outside.”

I sighed. “That’s right. And I guess I’m in cahoots with him, if you want to put it that way. He’s my uncle, and two of us run a two-man agency. Hunter and Hunter. Both of whom have botched a job tonight. Now will you uncock that revolver? If it goes off accidentally, even if it’s not aiming at me, you’ll be breaking a rule. No noise after ten o’clock, remember.”

I should have kept my mouth shut. The gun came up and aimed at me again. “I still don’t know you’re a detective, just because you say so. When I looked through your stuff I thought I might find something that would tell me what you are—but I didn’t, except this gun. And that could just as easily prove you a criminal.”

I said, “I’ve got identification. License and all. But they’re in my pocket and I’m not going to reach for a pocket with you jittering that gun at me.” The gun wasn’t jittering at all—it was plenty steady—but I thought it was better to say it that way than to say *I was jittery*, which I was.

“Which pocket?”

She was really being careful. I grinned at her. “Inside coat pocket. And you needn’t worry about me having another gun in another shoulder holster under my coat, because I was in my shirt sleeves when you came in here and you saw me put my coat on. Okay?”

She nodded and I reached into my pocket, pulled out the papers I had there—noticing that among them was the envelope holding the check for the office rent; I’d forgotten to mail it—and sorted out a couple of items, tossed them onto the end of the bed within her reach. She picked them up and looked at them, but did it with one hand and kept her powder dry and a corner of her eye on me until she’d finished. Then she let go of the revolver and stood up.

“All right, I’ll believe you now. And if you’ll excuse me—”

“Please sit down again, Miss Rogers,” I said. “We haven’t completely finished yet.”

“What more is there? If you think that just because I now admit you’re a detective and not—”

“Please sit down,” I said. “I’ve got something more to tell you, and—after holding a loaded, cocked gun on me for five minutes—won’t you do me the favor of listening?”

A bit reluctantly she sat down again.

I said, “You overlooked one thing in questioning me—who I was working for. Aren’t you interested? Some detectives don’t care who their clients are. I could be working for some criminal with designs on you—or the money he

thinks you have or know the location of. I'm not. My uncle and I don't work that way. But—"

"I can guess who your client is without your telling me. The bonding company that's going to have to pay the money if it's decided my father took it. Who else besides police—and they don't hire private detectives—would have any honest interest in the money?"

"But I've talked to them, several times. And I've told them the truth. My father didn't take the money. I don't know who did, or where it is. So what have I got to gain by talking to you about it?"

I said, "You're right, we're working for the bonding Company." I didn't see any harm in admitting that much—as long as I kept Starlock out of the middle; I didn't want her to get mad at Ben Starlock and maybe not to go to work tomorrow and Saturday morning. "But here's something you're overlooking. The bonding company isn't interested solely in finding the money. They'll be just as happy to find out—and be able to prove—that he was innocent, that someone else got it. That lets them off the hook just as much as turning up the money itself. So, in that way and to that extent, their interest is the same as yours, isn't it? You certainly want your father's name cleared, don't you?"

"Yes—" I definitely had her interest now. "But—how would it be helpful? What, since I don't know anything, could I do to help you, or them?"

"You could play along, let yourself be roped."

"Roped?"

I explained to her what roping was—the operation of a detective making friends with a subject and, without the subject's knowing he was a detective, getting him talking and learning things from him that he might not want to tell to someone he did know was a detective. And I explained what the Hunter & Hunter operation had been planned to be—how Uncle Am's tailing her had just been a preliminary step to help me learn how to make contact with her.

"So," I said, "you won't have to be worried about being followed any more—at least not by him. Why not let me follow through with my part of it, and become friendly you? No more friendly of course, than you want to. But—now that you've convinced yourself that I haven't got horns—do you find yourself liking me at all? Or think that you could get to like me? I'm a nice guy; I'm free, single, and three years older than you are. Would a date or two with me be unpleasant?"

"But—"

"And here's something nice. They'd be on the expense account, not on me. Why shouldn't you have dinner with me tomorrow night at the Blackstone or Ireland's or somewhere, maybe a show afterwards, and with the bonding company paying the bill?"

She laughed. "It might not be bad. But would it be honest—for you, I mean? Since I do know that you're a detective...."

"I think that will be an advantage. If you didn't know what I was I'd have

to work up to talking about the case—about the money and about your father—slowly and gradually to keep you from getting suspicious. This way we can talk frankly—as we have been talking. I can learn a lot more in a lot less time. And we'll have fun, but we will talk about the case too."

"But what can I tell you about it that isn't already known?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but I'll find out. Is it a date? Shall I pick you up tomorrow at five? I know where you work, of course."

She smiled—and it was the first time I'd seen her smile. I liked it. "All right, except not at work. If we're eating at a nice place, I'll want to come home and dress first. Here at half past six? My room is the one right over this one."

"I'd already deduced that," I said. "Don't forget that I'm a detective. By the way, do you drink?"

"Sometimes. Why?"

"Good. It would be harder for me to rope you if you didn't. But more specifically, it's only a little after eleven o'clock. Why don't we wash the taste of gunpowder out of our mouths right now with a pair of martinis or highballs? It wouldn't take you more than a couple of minutes to go up and put on a dress instead of that housecoat and I know a nice quiet bar only a few blocks from here. And if we find a man in a brown suit following us, I'll send him packing. Or anyone else, for that matter. That's another advantage you'll get out of this arrangement, bodyguard service. And I'm serious about that,"

"Thanks, Mr. Hunter."

"Ed," I said. "If I'm going to do a good job of roping we've got to be Ed and Wanda. But how about that drink?"

"Thanks, Ed. But not tonight. I'm tired and I'm a working girl; I've got to get up tomorrow morning."

She stood and I stood and opened the door for her. She passed so close to me that I was tempted—but refrained. I didn't want to crowd my luck and risk spoiling things by trying to kiss her tonight. Let alone trying for anything more than that.

After I heard her moving around upstairs I uncocked my gun and started to put it back in the drawer. Then on second thought I put it and the holster in the suitcase instead and locked the suitcase. Mrs. Czerny might snoop through drawers for all I knew and I didn't want to have to explain to her too that I had a right to have one, and why. In that case the whole damn rooming house would know my business, not just Wanda.

Then I left and headed for Mrs. Brady's rooming house. It was less than eight blocks and I walked. It was about half past eleven when I got there and I could see there wasn't any light in our room so I figured Uncle Am was probably asleep.

But he wasn't. He'd turned out the light only a few minutes before and was still awake. He swung his legs out of bed and sat on the edge of it.

"Hoping you'd show up," he said.

“Why especially?”

“Because, dammit, I’ve been wanting to have a beer or two ever since you waved me off the job. But I figured something had come up and you might be calling me or dropping around, so I came right home. Haven’t had anything to eat yet either—except a sandwich I picked up on the way home and ate here. You’re not in any hurry to get back there, are you?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve got all night.”

“Good. Then I’ll get dressed and we’ll go out. What happened?”

“Long story on my end,” I said. “I’ll tell you that over the beers. But while you’re dressing, tell me how she spotted you. She did, you know; she was calling copper while I went outside. There’d have been a prowler car by in a few minutes.”

“I figured that. Yeah, I know how she spotted me, but I don’t see how I could have helped it, Ed. She must’ve been suspicious someone might be trailing her—and she picked a damn smart way of finding out. It was at the movie—”

“Start at the beginning,” I said. “You might as well.”

He’d gone to bed in his shorts and undershirt. He was pulling on socks now.

He said, “Okay, the beginning. She came out of the building at five-oh-five. It was drizzling then and she didn’t have an umbrella. Maybe for that reason she went right into a restaurant—Corey’s, the one only a few doors away. Stayed in there three quarters of an hour while I waited across the street.

“Then she came out and went home. The drizzle had stopped by then and she walked. I gave her a long tail—I’m reasonably sure she didn’t spot me.”

“She didn’t,” I said. “She told the coppers only that a man had followed her home from the movies. So she hadn’t spotted you before then. She went right home, didn’t stop anywhere?”

“Didn’t stop in anywhere. Just around the corner from Covent Place she ran into someone she knew coming the other way, stopped and talked to him a few minutes but it looked casual. Tall, husky guy with black hair, maybe about thirty. Want more than that?”

“Might as well,” I said. “It could be someone she knows at the rooming house and if so I can identify him later.”

“About six feet, two hundred pounds. Didn’t get color of eyes; I was looking away when he came on and passed me. I’d say he’s a tough customer, but not bad looking. Gray suit, light blue shirt, no hat. I’d know him again, but that’s about as close as I can give it to you.”

“Go on,” I said. “I’ll know him from that if he’s a roomer there.”

“I turned the corner just as she was going in. I was sure she hadn’t spotted me up to then, so I walked on past to case the joint. That’s when I saw the Room for Rent sign. But she might come out again almost right away, so I didn’t take the chance of heading for a telephone right then. But she stayed

there almost an hour before she came out. This time she headed over to State Street and south and went into the movie. That was when I phoned you.

"After that I went into the movie after her, managed to spot her after my eyes got used to the dark and took a seat near the back where I could watch her.

"When she went out I gave her a full minute before I got up and left. But that's where she spotted me. She was still in the lobby, pretending to put on lipstick but facing the door I had to come through. She got a good look at me, naturally. I had to walk right past her. But I quick got put of sight outside and waited till she was over half a block away—heading back toward home—before I got out of cover. And I gave her plenty distance and most of the time stayed on the other side of the street. And she didn't turn to look back. Still, she stopped and looked in shop windows several times, and must have caught me in a mirror in one of them. Having seen me close up once—" He shrugged. "Well, so I flubbed it. I should have stayed outside, across the street, while she was in that movie. Would have if I'd known she was suspicious of a tail and going to trap me. But I guess no harm's done—we got you in over there where you'll have a chance to meet her, if you already haven't, and that's all the tail was for, I wouldn't have been tailing her any more after tonight anyway."

He'd finished dressing while he talked and was putting on his suit coat. "You ready, kid?"

"Just a minute," I said. "I packed in such a hurry I didn't take a few things I'll need. I'll take them along now and then I won't have to come back here when we're through talking."

I went down the hall to the bathroom and got my razor and other stuff, then came back and got my bathrobe and slippers from the closet. I was starting to make a bundle of them when Uncle Am suggested that since they'd all go in his brief case, I might as well take that, so I did.

We went to Tom, Dick, and Harry's, a tavern actually run by three guys—two brothers and a cousin—having those first names. It's not the nearest tavern to our place, but it's the nearest one that's a good place to talk without having to yell over a juke box, television, or radio—or in some taverns all three. Besides they have good hot sandwiches available at all hours and Uncle Am was hungry.

We took a corner booth. Uncle Am ordered a hamburger with French fries and we each ordered a bottle of beer. I waited till we had our beer and then I started my story, from the time of getting his phone call. I was up to the point where Wanda had just knocked on my door to send me out to look for "that man" again when Uncle Am's sandwich came and I had to wait till the waitress had gone away.

Then I went on. Uncle Am was on the second bite of his sandwich and choked on it when I got to the point where I'd come back to my room and found my own gun cocked and pointed at me. I stood up in the booth and

reached across to slap him on the back.

I took up the story again. He didn't interrupt until I was telling him about passing over my license and identification and then he said, "My God, kid. If she knows you're a detective we both pulled bloopers. I guess we'll have to tell Starlock—"

"Wait," I said. "Eat your sandwich, and let me finish." I finished the story. Then I said, "Honest, I think the bloopers we pulled were the best things that could have happened. Suppose she hadn't spotted you. She wouldn't have stopped at that phone to call copper and I wouldn't have had a chance to get in conversation with her. She'd have tripped on up the stairs to her room—and I wouldn't even have met her yet. It might have been days before I could have got to know her.

"And as it is, I've got a date with her for tomorrow night. Tonight, rather; it's after midnight now. And sure she knows I'm a detective and what I'm interested in—but I'd say that's to the good. We can talk frankly. Bet I can get derails out of her in one evening that—"

"Sure," Uncle Am interrupted me. "That's fine and okay if she's on the square. But what if she knows her father is guilty and knows where the money is?"

"Do you think she'd tell me that any quicker if she thought I was Ed Hunter, printer, instead of Ed Hunter, detective? No, and under cover I'd have a hell of a time getting her to talk about the case at all. And if she's lying, I think I'll be able to tell—at least after I get to know her fairly well. Shall we have one more bottle of beer apiece?"

We ordered one more bottle apiece and while we were drinking it, Uncle Am said, "Kid, here's what we'll have to do. Even if you're right that you've got a better in this way. We'll have to level with Starlock."

"Sure," I said. "But let me be in on the interview with him. I think I can convince him to keep me on the job."

"Okay, Ed. Listen, you haven't any plans for tomorrow, have you? I mean—before evening."

"No," I said. "Except to have breakfast with Mrs. Czerny. It'd look funny if, after paying for a week's breakfasts, I'd miss the very first one."

"Okay. Here's what I'll do—I'll call Starlock at his home early tomorrow morning, about the time he'll be getting up and dressed. I'll make a date to come up to our office, or for us to meet him somewhere, whichever way he wants it. Probably he'll want to see us at nine, before he goes to his own place. You might as well come in at nine, since you're getting up for breakfast anyway."

That was okay by me, I told him, and we talked about other things until we finished our beer and left. He headed one way and I the other for the different rooming houses we'd be sleeping in tonight.

CHAPTER FOUR

I went right to bed, setting my mental alarm clock to wake me at a quarter of eight. I went right to sleep and woke up at a quarter to eight.

In the morning I had to try three times before I found the bathroom unoccupied, and I began to appreciate Mrs. Czerny's rule against baths between six and nine. But I was dressed, shaved, and ready for breakfast by a quarter after. The door to the apartment at the back of the hall was ajar. I knocked on it lightly as I walked on in.

Breakfast was being served; there were two people eating it at the moment. There were six places at the table but, since people ate it at various times from seven to nine, I doubt if they were all ever taken at any one time.

Mrs. Czerny had heard my knock; she appeared in the kitchen doorway on the other side of the room and called out, "Morning, Mr. Hunter. Sit down. Meet Miss Watrous and Mr. Black."

As I slid into a seat Miss Watrous and I murmured good mornings to one another and, since Black only nodded to me, I settled for a nod back.

Miss Watrous looked like a schoolteacher, but I learned later she was ticket taker at a Loop theater. Mr. Black I already knew, by description; he was big, husky, black-haired and about thirty. He wasn't wearing a gray suit this morning, just slacks and a sport shirt open far enough down to show a hairy chest, but I was reasonably sure he was the man whom Uncle Am had described as having stopped briefly to talk to Wanda when she was about a block from the boardinghouse, on her way home from work.

Breakfast turned out to be either cereal or eggs, with toast and coffee. I took eggs. It wasn't a big breakfast but it wasn't a bad one for the price considering you could have seconds on the toast or coffee if you asked for them. I had enough without seconds.

Miss Watrous left a few minutes after I started to eat, but Black stuck around after he'd finished and asked for and got a second cup of coffee. I thought it wouldn't hurt to get acquainted so I made an innocuous remark or two, but I got only monosyllables in answer, and gave up.

He took his time over that coffee and outlasted me. But not by long. I finished, called out a "So long," mostly to Mrs. Czerny out in the kitchen, but that he could take to include him if he wanted to, and left. I was only part way to the front door when I heard footsteps behind me and he called out, "Hey, Hunter."

I stopped and turned, wondering what he wanted.

He said, "Want to talk to you a minute. Private. That's why I didn't yak back there." He jerked a thumb back toward Mrs. Czerny's door. "Come on in my room."

There didn't seem to be any animosity or threat in his voice, and I wondered what the hell he wanted. Did he know who I was? I didn't see how he could know—unless Wanda had told him. They knew one another. She could have seen him on her way out this morning—or even last night after I'd left to talk to Uncle Am.

Anyway, even at the cost of being a little late at the office or having to take a cab instead of walking, I wanted to find out. I said, "Okay. Which room?"

He went past me and opened the door of the room next to mine, the second one back from the street. I began to get an idea what this might be about, and to get a little scared too. But I'd said okay and I had to bluff it out and follow through.

I went in. It was a room a little smaller than mine, but it had the same items of furniture in it so it was a little more crowded. Behind me I heard the door close and when I turned he was standing with his back against it. But his face was still dead-pan.

He said, "You had comp'ny in your room last night, chum."

"Is there a rule against that? We didn't make any noise."

"I know you didn't, except yakking. And I didn't get any of the words, but I know the voice. Wanda Rogers. And listen—I don't want you hanging around her, see?"

I didn't see that I'd convince him, if I tried, that my visitor had been someone else; he was too sure. So I didn't try.

I said, "I don't see what business it is of yours who it was. Anyway, if you were listening, you know she didn't stay long—and that we only talked."

"Yeah, I know that. And I heard her go upstairs after, alone. I'm not saying anything happened. I'm just telling you to lay off her, see?"

I saw—and didn't see. Was this big lug in love with Wanda? That could be, but I couldn't see Wanda having given him any encouragement; surely he wasn't her type, not by a thousand miles.

I said, "You're not her guardian or husband. She's free, white, and twenty-two. What business is it of yours?"

"I'm making it my business, chum. Never mind why. And I'm not asking you; I'm telling you." His fists clenched. He didn't say what he was going to do with them if I didn't agree; he didn't have to. I studied him, wondering if I could take him. There didn't seem to be any out on trying—unless I knuckled under, and I could hardly do that without spoiling the whole operation and quitting the job. I had at least one date with Wanda already—and I was going to keep it tonight, on my own money and not an expense account if Starlock called us off the job today. Even at the cost of a beating up, I wasn't going to backtrack now.

He was big; he had reach and at least thirty pounds weight on me. Some

big men are soft, but he didn't look soft.

I tried stalling. I said, "What's your interest in this, Black? Listen, even if you're in love with the girl you got no right to keep her from having dates with anyone she wants to. You don't own her."

He said, "I'm not arguing with you, chum. I'm telling you. Say you're laying off, or I'm going to lam the hell out of you. Here and now, unless you'd rather go out in the alley where we'll have more room to have fun."

I sighed. There wasn't going to be any way out of this, unless I crawled and screamed for help. And I was too big a boy to do either of those things. But, I realized, the alley was a damned good suggestion, from my point of view. Maybe I could take him and maybe I couldn't, but I'd have a lot better chance where there was more room for footwork. In this crowded room it couldn't possibly be anything but a slugger match; I'd be in a corner or falling across the bed or a chair the first time I took a step backward.

I said, "All right, if you want it that way, Black. The alley."

He stepped aside and let me out and, as he was closing his own door, I was unlocking mine. He was beside me in a second. "What the hell you going in there for?" Maybe he thought I was going in to slam the door and lock it behind me, or maybe to get a weapon.

I said, "You don't mind my tossing my suit coat on the bed, do you? You're not wearing one."

He stuck close to me, in the doorway. I took off my coat and tossed it on the bed, then my necktie. He moved back when he saw I was coming out, and I locked my door again and followed him out through the front door. There was a narrow areaway leading back between our building and the next and he let me go first, no doubt thinking I might decide to break and run if he let me get behind him. I might have done just that, under other circumstances; the best I could say for myself, in what was going to happen, was that I thought I had a chance. If he was slow, or muscle-bound or didn't know how to fight, if bulk and strength were all he had.

I rolled up my shirt sleeves as we made the passage between the buildings, and when we got back to the alley I stepped out into the middle of it and squared off. Since I was committed anyway, I didn't have to let him lead off; I'd get in the first blow if I could—and dance away, if I could.

He came right up to me, looking awkward as hell, and I began to hope for the best. I took a step back and then a step in, swinging a left toward his face to bring up his guard—which it did—and pivoting to put my right hand under it, hard into his breadbasket. A blow that should hurt, that should wind him if he was soft, cut down his speed if he wasn't.

It hurt all right, but it hurt me, not him. The muscles of his stomach had tensed and they were hard as rock; it was like putting my Sunday punch into a brick wall, only very slightly padded. I wanted to grab my knuckles and nurse them. But he was starting a roundhouse punch that I had to duck, and did duck—right into a left hand that hit me square in the middle of the chest, into the

solar plexus at which Wanda Rogers had aimed my revolver last night. But the revolver hadn't hit me there, and this wallop did hit me, like a pile driver. When you watch boxing you see an occasional blow land there and squarely—but there's a boxing glove to cushion the impact a little and it's seldom if ever a knockout punch. An ungloved fist can knock you out there, when it's delivered by a guy like Black.

Anyway it knocked me out.

When the lights came back on again I was flat on my back in the alley, gasping for breath, and every breath hurting me as much as though I had every single rib broken.

Somebody was standing over me but it took me seconds to decide who it was. "Had enough, chum? God, but you go down easy," the somebody said, and I remembered where I was and what had happened.

I waited a second or two until I could breathe again, more or less, and could talk.

"Enough," I said. "You should have told me you're a pro."

He chuckled—not a really amused chuckle. "Going to get up and take some more—or going to go along with what I told you about that girl—or want to be worked over where you are? Which?"

I got a little more breath back, enough to manage a few sentences all at once, while I was making up my mind what those sentences should be. Then I rolled on my side and got an elbow under me, but I very definitely didn't get up or act as though I was trying to. But I was facing him now, where I could watch his feet—in case he got ideas in that direction I could at least deflect the first kick.

I said, "I'm not getting up. You can lick me—I'll give you that. But about the working over, one thing. If you start it, go ahead and kill me, face a murder rap. If you do less than that I'll see you get the book thrown at you the minute I can talk again. Either that or kill you myself—with a gun. Don't leave the job half finished. Get me? I'm not kidding."

And I wasn't. It must have showed in my voice. He believed me. I could see him thinking, I could almost hear the wheels go around in his head. I saw him take a quick look both ways along the alley. He was figuring his chances, and I cut them down for him.

"One more thing," I said. "If you expect to kill me and get away with it, you'd better do it damn fast, once you start. Because a fair fight—and that's what what there was of it was—is one thing and a working-over or a murder is something else. The second you make a move toward me I'm going to start yelling—damn loud. This alley'll be full of people before you can finish."

He glared down at me, but it was a baffled glare. He said something I won't repeat, turned on his heel and strode back into the areaway.

I took my time—I had to take my time—getting up and following him through it. I felt woozy as hell, and my whole body ached from the waist up. When I reached the street I saw him just going around the far corner; he'd

gone on, wherever he was going, instead of back into the rooming house. That didn't make me unhappy.

Back in my own room I sat on the bed a minute or two and then looked at my watch. It was only a few minutes before nine. I was going to be late at the office in any case. I'd have to brush myself off and clean up, too. Then I remembered that it was only a maybe that Starlock would be there at that time; if he wasn't going to be I wouldn't have to worry. And I sure didn't feel like hurrying.

I went to the phone, dropped my coin, and dialed the office number. Uncle Am was already there. I said, "Ed, Uncle Am. Is Starlock there, or coming in soon?"

"No, kid. I got him at home before he left all right. But he said he had a hell of a busy morning, on another case, and made a date to have lunch with us. Twelve-thirty at the Stag Grill; he'll reserve a table. You want to meet us there, or you coming in the office first?"

I said, "Good. I'm glad it's postponed till then, I mean. Something's come up here, something I want to check on first. Listen, I don't know whether I'll come into the office first or go right to the lunch date. If I'm not in the office by twelve I'll see you at the Stag Grill at half past."

"Okay, kid. Something in connection with what you're working on?"

"Damned if I know," I said. "But I'll try to find out I'll tell you about it when I see you."

"Don't want to talk over the phone from there, huh? Okay, be seeing you. Take care of yourself."

"I'll try to," I said.

I went back into my room and sat still again for ten minutes or so to get some strength back. Then I undressed, put on my bathrobe, and went down the hall to the bathroom. It was after nine now, okay to take a bath, and I certainly wanted one. I drew a full tub of hot water and soaked in it a long time. While I was in it I checked my ribs and decided none of them was cracked. If that pile driver punch hadn't hit dead center it would have hurt less and probably wouldn't have kayoed me, but it would almost certainly have done some rib cracking.

Back in my room I checked the clothes I'd had on when I'd gone down in the alley. The pants were just dusty and luckily I'd brought a clothesbrush so that was all right. But the shirt had taken the worst of it and I put on a clean one when I dressed again.

Then I went back and knocked on Mrs. Czerny's door. She opened it. "Yes, Mr. Hunter?"

I said, "Please call me Ed, Mrs. Czerny. May I come in a minute?"

"Sure." She stepped back and let me in. "Sit down, Ed. Anything wrong?"

"No," I said. "But I wonder if you'd mind if I ask a question or two about one of your other roomers. I—well, I had a little quarrel with him, and I want to know what I'm getting into."

"I'll bet I can guess who. Blackie. Jules Black." I nodded, and she went on. "Best advice I can give you is to stay clear of him, not get in any fights with him. He's a lot bigger than you and he's tough."

I said, "I gathered that. Is he a professional fighter?"

"Not now, maybe he was once. Know where the Gray Goose is?"

I opened my mouth to say I knew where it was but I'd never been there; then I remembered I'd just come in from Gary and shook my head instead.

"Well, it's a night club on Clark—way north on Clark, not the honky-tonk part of it near here. Blackie's the doorman there—doorman and bouncer."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I guess he is tough if he's a bouncer; he'd have to be." And then, while she was answering questions without getting curious why I was asking them I sprung the one I'd really been leading up to. "How long has he roomed here?"

"Three—three and a half weeks. What did he quarrel with you about, Ed?"

"Oh, nothing important," I said. "It was—well, kind of personal and anyway I don't want to sound like I'm making a complaint."

"All right, but you be careful of him, Ed. He's got a temper and I'd say he could be dangerous if you make him lose it."

I smiled at her. "I'll be careful. And thanks a lot, Mrs. Czerny." I turned to go, and then turned back. "Oh, not that this is important, but if he works at a night club doesn't that mean he works most of the night? How come he's up so early as to have breakfast with you?"

"Just on Friday mornings, Ed. Thursday's his night off. Otherwise he sleeps late, usually till noon. You won't have to worry about running into him every morning at breakfast. Just Fridays."

"Good," I said. "And thanks for telling me he sleeps late other mornings. Since my room's next to his, and I guess the walls are pretty thin, I'll be quiet mornings if I'm in my room."

"I don't think you need to worry, about ordinary noise. He sleeps pretty sound. I know because a time or two a phone call came and I had to hammer on his door to wake him. And you don't have a radio, do you, just in that one suitcase you brought?"

"Not with me," I said. I was glad of a chance to explain why I was traveling so light; otherwise she might wonder. "I've got some stuff in Gary but I'll leave it there till after I get a job here and know I'm going to like it. Well, thanks again."

I went back to my room. I still didn't feel so hot—my chest felt as though somebody had driven a truck across it—and a little rest would do me good. Uncle Am could take care of the office and I'd wait till I could meet him and Starlock together.

So I lay down on the bed, but I didn't go to sleep. I thought about my date with Wanda tonight and what questions I'd want to ask her and how to go about asking them. I didn't try to think about the case in general and the questions of whether or not Jason Rogers had or hadn't really taken the money

or where it was now if he had. Because it doesn't do any good to wonder about a case until you have a lot more information about it than I had as yet in this one. Guessing is a waste of time without facts—or at least strong impressions—to lead up to your guesses. Like trying to plan ahead in a chess game that hasn't started yet, when you don't even know what opening your opponent is going to use.

I thought about Blackie, Jules Black, and wondered where he could fit in, if he did fit in. But I didn't have enough facts to go on there either. From Wanda tonight I'd learn how well she knew him and how and when she'd met him and what made him think he was her protector. Then, if she gave me straight answers, I could figure Blackie a little better than I could now.

Right now the only intelligent thought I could think of about Blackie was that I'd like to bring my trombone around to Mrs. Czerny's from Mrs. Brady's and, some morning while Blackie was still sleeping, make with some Dixieland, fortissimo. That would wake him all right. But maybe it wasn't such an intelligent thought after all. Even if Blackie appreciated it, Mrs. Czerny might not.

At twelve o'clock, so I could take my time strolling, I left and wandered in to the Loop. I got to the Stag Grill just on time, but both Ben Starlock and Uncle Am were there ahead of me, and had drinks in front of them.

Uncle Am said, "Hi, Ed, sit down. Listen, we both got here a little early and I've already told Ben how I flubbed the job last night. My part didn't take long. Now it's your turn."

"But get yourself a drink first," Starlock said. He flagged a waiter and I ordered myself a highball.

I told my story and Starlock's expression didn't change. But he frowned when I finished—the last night part of it, that is. He said, "Ed, I agree with you, I think. You've got a better chance of getting something than if she didn't know what you were—but would be suspicious of you, as she would if you asked too many questions. I'll tell you what. I'll take the rap—I'll leave out part of your story when I report to the bonding company, the part about the gun and about your having to level with her, or get turned over to the cops. I'll just tell them the rest, and that you've got a date with her tonight. Okay?"

"Fine," I said.

"But there's a catch. A test, whether she's really going to level with you or just play you along for a sucker. If it's the latter, there's no point your going on after tonight."

"Okay, what's the test, Ben? Or am I not supposed to know?"

"I'll tell you. Remember when she gave me notice she said she had a job modeling at Marshall Field's? And I said we might as well check on that and that I'd do it. Well, I did—and she hasn't a job there. They never heard of her.

"So we've caught her in a lie—to me. See what she tells you about why she's quitting my agency and where she's going to work next. If she gives you Marshall Field's, well, then she's lying to you too."

Uncle Am said, "Fair enough, Ed? Listen, you said you were going to check into something there at the rooming house this morning. What was it? Something important?"

I don't know," I said. "But it'll take some time to tell, we're all out of drinks. Shall we—?"

Ben Starlock was already flagging down the waiter again.

I told them about my fight with Blackie, about what had led up to it, and about what Mrs. Czerny had told me about him afterwards.

This time it was Uncle Am who was frowning when I finished. "Kid," he said, "that guy could be dangerous. Stay away from him."

Starlock nodded. "Keep out of trouble with him, Ed. But I'm curious about him. Listen, let me check on him. I'll find out from Frank Bassett whether he has a record, and I'll check on him out at the Gray Goose and see if he really works there and for how long."

Uncle Am said, "Let me do that, Ben. I know Leon Cavallo, who runs the place, or used to, anyway. I guess he still does. And if he does, I can get more out of him than you can. Or the cops, for that matter."

Ben grunted. "I suppose you'll want to see him during night club hours, so you can run up a bill for the expense account."

Uncle Am said, "I'll get more out of him that way. He'll be in a better mood."

I said, "Leon Cavallo. Is he an opera fan? Or does that just happen to be his right name?"

"He's an opera fan. And it's partly his right name—the Cavallo part. He had an unpronounceable first name and changed it to Leon. On purpose, sure."

Starlock looked from one of us to the other. "What are you guys talking about?"

I said, "Leoncavallo—all one name, famous opera composer, best known for *Pagliacci*, the one about the clown."

Starlock said, "You erudite bastards. All right, Am, you can see this Cavallo. And you might as well call Bassett to find out if this Black guy has a record. But don't charge me for that. Not even a dime for the phone call—make it from your office." He turned to me. "Ed, is there any chance this Black made you for a detective?"

"He couldn't have, any way I know, unless Wanda told him. I don't think she did, or would have, but that's high on my list of things to find out from her tonight and what the relationship between them is, if any. If any, it's probably one-sided; I can't see a gal like that going for a gorilla like him."

"You were unconscious a while after he kayoed you. Could he have gone through your pockets?"

I shook my head. "My identification was in my coat. I left it in my room and locked the door before we headed for our little romp in the alley."

"But you'd have had the key to your room in your pants pocket. Could he

have taken that and let himself in your room while you were out, and then come back?"

"I couldn't have been out that long. A ten count probably, maybe even half a minute or so. But I know the timing—when we went to the alley, when I got back to my room. I couldn't have been out long enough for him to do that."

I thought a minute. "Besides," I said, "if he even suspected me of being a detective, I don't think he'd have risked picking a fight with me like he did—whether he's involved in our case in any way or not. He'd have walked wide around me."

"Guess you're right about that," Starlock said. He glanced at his watch. "Hell, we've been yakking an hour, and I've got a lot of work to do this afternoon. Let's order and eat."

We ordered and ate, and then broke up the meeting. Uncle Am told me to take off the afternoon if I wanted, but I said I'd as soon hang around the office as anywhere else and went back with him.

In the office he said, "Well, kid, some rummy?"

"Call Bassett first," I suggested, "and get business over with."

He called Frank Bassett—our best friend at headquarters—and I heard him ask about Jules Black and then say, "Okay, Frank. But don't hang up yet. Another question. Do you know if Cavallo still runs the Gray Goose?...Good. Happen to know how I can reach him to make a date with him? Away from the club, I mean?...Okay, Frank; we'll be here."

He hung up and said, "Frank doesn't know the name Jules Black but he'll have him looked up in the files. And he doesn't know Cavallo personally, but he says a couple of the boys there do and he'll talk to them if they're in. Well, get the cards and the score pad."

We'd finished one game by the time the phone rang. I said, "It's probably Frank. Wait till I get on the extension."

CHAPTER FIVE

I went to the outer office and got the extension picked up just in time to hear Uncle Am answer the call. It was Bassett.

He said, "Yeah, there's a record on a Jules Black, alias Blackie. Not an awful lot, but something. Five arrests, one conviction. The conviction was—let's see, on the first arrest, nine years ago. Mugging. Gave his age as twenty-two then—make him thirty-one now. He got two years, did twenty months of it. Picked up four times since then—first time was two years after he got out of jail—but none of the charges stuck. Went to trial on only one of them, but got off."

"What were the charges, Frank?"

"Mugging twice, assault twice. It was an assault charge that got him before a judge, but, like I say, he got an acquittal. Haven't the details here, but I could dig them."

"Thanks, Frank, but I don't think we'll need them. What was the date of the last arrest?"

"Two years ago. Either he's been keeping his nose clean since then, or we haven't been catching him at anything."

"Okay. How about Cavallo?"

"Talked to one of the boys that know him. Says that Cavallo isn't at the club too often on weekday nights, but he's there every Saturday night, and most Sunday nights. And I got his address—an apartment on La Salle—but no phone number". It's probably unlisted, but I can get it for you if it's important."

Uncle Am said, "Don't bother, Frank. As long as I can count on catching him at the club tomorrow night, it'll keep till then. Oh, you know if the gambling rooms over the Goose are open again?"

"My friend says not, that Cavallo's kept 'em closed since the raid couple of years ago. Guess he's still got his other business, though."

When I rejoined Uncle Am after the call I asked him, "What's Cavallo's other business?"

"He's with the syndicate that controls the bookies on the north side. I've heard that he's head of the syndicate, and also that he's just a member of it. I don't know which is true, but it's a big operation in any case. Running the night club is just a side line for him. Or a front, if you want to put it that way."

"Then basically he's a racketeer."

"Well, books are illegal, so I suppose you could put it that way. But

morally, is it any worse to bet with a bookie than to bet at a track?"

"Maybe not. But what do the bookies get out of belonging?"

"About the same advantages someone in a legal trade gets out of belonging to a union. Maybe more. Protection, legal help, and bail when the protection doesn't work. A chance to lay off money if one takes a bet too big for him to pay off on if it wins. Once in a while a bookie won't lay off, takes a chance, and goes in over his head. They'll pay off for him—and get the money back from him later. They keep the boys in line. If you make a bet with any bookie in syndicate territory you know you're going to collect if you win."

"But the bookie has to belong, or else?"

"Or else he doesn't stay in business very long, sure. But that doesn't mean he's going to be rubbed out, or even worked over. At least not since they've got things as well organized as they have now. They've got subtler ways."

"Such as?"

"Protection in reverse, for one thing. Someone always seems to be phoning in complaints to the cops. Or they stick him on a boat race, a fixed race. Most races are honest these days, but once in a while there's a boat race—and usually the syndicate knows about it. They warn their own boys not to take any big bets on it. But the outlaw bookie finds himself stuck with some big ones—syndicate money, but laid through people who've established themselves as his customers. And who've also spread the tip to other customers of his, legitimate ones. And he pays off or goes out of business. If he survives, he sees the light and joins up."

"You mean they don't use goons at all?"

"I suppose so, but only in extreme cases. Or even torpedoes, if they have to meet violence with violence."

"Do you suppose Blackie is one of the goons?"

"I doubt it, kid. If he's holding a full-time job as doorman-bouncer at the club, I'd say that's all he does. I don't think Leon mixes club business with syndicate business. But I'll ask him. Say, let's have a look at the key to your room."

I handed it over and he looked at it and handed it back. "Hell, that kind of lock. I could open one with a bobby pin in half a minute, with a picklock in five seconds. And I'd like a look around Blackie's room. He's the only lead we've got—even if we don't know what he's a lead to. He'll be working tonight; maybe I'll go around and case the room."

I said, "Okay, but not tonight. Wait till sometime when I can play lookout for you; it'll be safer. Besides, I might find out something from Wanda, or you from Cavallo, that will eliminate him and save us from having to do it."

"Okay, Ed. That makes sense. Well, get out the cards."

I got out the cards and score pad and we started a game of gin, but we were only about halfway through when the phone rang. Uncle Am answered it and I went to listen in. It was a job for us. The caller was a Mr. Mabley, general manager of a chain of supermarkets, for whom we'd done small jobs a few

times before. This time there'd been a burglary at their store on Howard two nights ago. They didn't want us to investigate the burglary as such; there was nothing we could do there that the police couldn't do better, and the police didn't have any leads. But there was a suspicion that there was an inside angle to the job because the burglar hadn't had to blow or force the safe, which meant that he was either a real Jimmy Valentine with sandpapered fingers—or that he'd been tipped off to the combination. Also he'd picked a good night for the burglary; the manager had missed making a deposit the day before and there had been two days' receipts in the safe instead of one.

Only the manager had the combination to the safe, but he'd been with the company for eighteen years and was a relative of one of the owners to boot; they considered him above suspicion. However, they were worried about the assistant manager, who'd been with them only a short time, and wanted him investigated. He wasn't supposed to have known the combination but there were ways he might have found it out. And he certainly knew that the safe held two days' receipts that particular night. They didn't suspect him of doing the job himself; the police had talked to him and had verified his alibi; the burglary had been committed before midnight and he'd been able to account for all his time up to then. But if he had known the combination he could easily have been the tip-off man.

Mr. Mabley didn't expect us to be able to prove it if he had been but he thought a short investigation should give enough indication one way or the other to let them make up their minds whether to keep him or play safe by letting him go. They wanted to know how his scale of living compared with the eighty dollars a week they paid him, whether he gambled, whether he was or had been in debt, his general character and reputation, and especially whether he consorted with criminals or hung out at places where he'd be likely to get to know any. Mr. Mabley authorized three days' time on the job; that was as much as they wanted to spend and they'd make up their minds on the basis of what we could find out in that length of time.

When he started to give us our starting data—the man's address, description, and other things already known about him, Uncle Am told him to wait a minute, put his hand over the phone and called out to me, "I'll be handling this one, Ed, so I'll take the notes on it. You can sign off if you want."

I kept on listening but let Uncle Am take the notes.

When I went back into the inner office he was standing up, stretching. "Going to start on if right away?"

"Why not? It's mid-afternoon but if I work through the evening, it'll be a full day for today. Another day, another dollar. At this rate, we'll get rich quick. You going to stick around? With you with a date for this evening, you'd have to turn down another job if one came in."

"I'll stick around anyway," I said. "It might be something that doesn't have to be done right away. You'll still be busy tomorrow but I don't know whether

I'll be or not. Depends on what happens tonight."

He left, and I stuck around until five, but the only thing that happened was a call from an office equipment salesman who tried to sell me an addressing machine, a check writer, a dictating machine, a comptometer, and a few other little items. I finally convinced him that we didn't need any of those things.

I closed the office at five and went home. Home to my and Uncle Am's room at Mrs. Brady's, not to my room at Mrs. Czerny's. I'd thought it out and had decided it was best for me to stay away from there until time to pick up Wanda at six-thirty. I wanted to avoid further trouble with Blackie, particularly tonight, if possible. If he was there and in his room, he'd hear me in mine if I entered it. And he could hear me leave and if he listened at his door he could tell that I was going upstairs instead of out. And he'd know where I was going and might call my bluff on an assault charge and start another fight. Or be mad enough to clobber me again, assault charge or not.

Anyway, I wanted to change suits and I hadn't packed an extra one to take to Covent Place. I did that first, and then messed around on my trombone for half an hour or so until time to leave.

I got to Mrs. Czerny's on the stroke of half past six, bypassed my room, and went up the stairs and knocked on Wanda Roger's door.

Amazingly, she was ready. She called out, "Just a second, Ed," and came out in only a few seconds, just long enough for her to put on the coat she was wearing—the tan shortie she'd worn when Uncle Am had followed her home from work last night. It was open, and under it she wore a taffeta dress with wide pink and white diagonal stripes that made her look like a peppermint stick—except for shape; she wasn't shaped in the least like a peppermint stick, and she looked much sweeter than one. It was cut low in front and from that and its length I knew, without being able to see shoulders or arms, that the dress was formal or at least semiformal.

"Hi," I said. "You're beautiful. But we should have compared notes on dressing; I should have worn a tux."

She looked concerned. "Want me to change, Ed? It'd take only a couple of minutes."

"No," I said. "You're perfect. And luckily I at least wore a dark suit; I'll get by. Nobody will look at me anyway."

She laughed and pulled the door shut behind her. I said, "But will you do me a favor, Wanda? Let's not talk on our way down the stairs and through the hallway—not till we're outside. Ill explain after we're out; it might lead to quite a bit of explaining. Okay?"

She looked puzzled, but she said, "Okay, Ed. If you explain once we're outside."

So we went down the stairs and along the hall together but without talking, and outside.

"Now, Ed, what was that all about?" she asked, the moment we reached the sidewalk.

“First, where do you want to go, Wanda? We might as well be walking, or scouting for a taxi, while we talk.”

She thought a moment. “You mentioned Ireland’s—and that sounds fine. And it’s walking distance, so let’s walk.”

“Fine,” I said. We started west toward Clark Street. She tucked a hand under my arm companionably; I like a girl who does that instead of walking apart from you. I said, “In a nutshell, which I’ll explain later, there is a character named Jules Black, or Blackie, in the room next to me. He and I had a little trouble this morning—over you. In case he was in his room when we passed it, I didn’t want him to hear us talking together.”

“You had trouble with Blackie—over me?” She sounded really bewildered. “What on earth happened?”

I told her what on earth had happened. Not in exact detail or word for word, but what I did tell her was the exact truth. I didn’t try to make myself more of a coward or more of a hero than I had actually been—or Blackie more of a villain. When I finished the episode I said, “And now it’s your turn. Tell me everything you know about Blackie. From the beginning.”

“All right, Ed. The beginning was—oh, maybe three weeks ago, less than a week after I’d moved there. I’d brought enough clothes with me, when I’d come into town from Freeland, to last me a while, but I wanted some more and one evening, right after I left work and had a quick dinner, I went out to Freeland, to the house, and got two more suitcases full of clothes and things I wanted. Blackie—of course I didn’t know his name then—happened to be using the phone and finished his call just as I came back. He asked me if he could carry the suitcases for me and, since they were heavy, I let him carry them upstairs and into my room.

“He was polite, nice. He didn’t even try to get to know me, left as soon as he put them down. I unpacked them and then, because it was only half past eight and I didn’t know what else to do with myself I decided to go to a movie. I went downstairs and outside, and he was standing there, getting some fresh air, he said later. Since he’d carried the cases up for me I stopped to talk a moment and—well, it ended up with his saying he’d like to see a movie too and why couldn’t we go together? There wasn’t any reason so I said yes. I tried to make it Dutch, but he insisted on buying my ticket.”

“This would have been on a Thursday evening?”

“How did—Oh, you found out Thursday is his night off. Yes, it was a Thursday. Other nights he starts work at nine; he might still be around as late as when I first met him, but he wouldn’t have been free to go to a movie. He’s doorman at a night club, the Gray Goose. But I guess if you know his night off, you know that too.”

“Yes,” I said. “I talked to Mrs. Czerny about him. But go on, Wanda.”

“Well, that’s how we met. And since then I’ve gone out with him again twice. Once to a movie again, once to a tavern on State Street for a few drinks. Once was on a Thursday evening again, the other time a Sunday

afternoon.

“But he’s been so nice—and he’s made no passes, hasn’t even tried to kiss me. He acts like a big brother, Ed. I think of him as being—well, like a big, friendly, Newfoundland dog. I like him. But there’s nothing between us, never has been. I can’t imagine why he’d make trouble for you, tell you to let me alone.”

I closed my eyes and tried to see Blackie as a big, friendly, Newfoundland dog; the picture just wouldn’t come.

It was almost as hard to visualize him acting like a big brother to a girl as pretty as Wanda, but not quite. For all I knew about him he could be a Jehovah’s Witness or a Holy Roller; he could honestly have been scandalized by the fact that he’d heard her voice in my room.

Or he could be homosexual; some very big and very tough guys are. Some of them are built more like sunflowers than pansies. You can find them among lumberjacks and prize fighters. That could account for his feeling like a big brother—or big sister—to Wanda, but—No, I just couldn’t see Blackie as a homo.

But Wanda was going on. “And he got me my job, the one I start tomorrow night.”

I almost stopped walking, but managed to make my question casual. “What job is that, Wanda?”

“Cigarette girl at the Gray Goose, Ed. Oh—I guess that surprises you. You said the bonding company turned over whatever information they had about me when they hired you. So if they checked with Mr. Starlock he’d have told them that I told him I was going to work at Marshall Field’s.”

“Yes, they did check with Starlock. But why did you tell him that? There’s nothing wrong with a cigarette girl job.”

“A lot of my friends—my father’s friends—back in Freeland would think so. And Mr. Starlock lives there and knows quite a few of them. I just didn’t want it to get back to Freeland, that’s all. I’m—well, I’m not too proud of it myself, Ed. But it’s going to earn me at least twice as much money as I could earn in an office, Mr. Starlock’s or any other. And I can use the extra money—I may or may not get my father’s estate someday, but even if I do it won’t be for a long time. I’m having to live on what I earn, and I’d rather live a little better than I am right now. A nice little apartment instead of one room. Things like that.”

“That I can understand,” I said. “But tell me about Blackie’s getting you the job. When, how?”

“Last Saturday evening, a week ago tomorrow, he came up to my room, early evening. He told me there was going to be an opening at the Gray Goose for a cigarette girl. He said he didn’t know exactly what the job would earn me—it’s all tips, of course—but he knew it would be at least twice whatever I could be making in my first office job. He said if I was interested I could go out with him when he reported for work at nine and that he’d introduce me to

the boss. He said it was a respectable place, that it would be an easy job and for only six hours a night, six days a week.

"Of course I was interested—who wouldn't be interested in a job paying twice what he's earning? I wasn't too crazy about the idea of working in a night club, of course, and if other things were equal I'd rather have stayed with Mr. Starlock."

I said, "But twice as much money isn't a case of other things being equal. So you took the job."

"I went with Blackie when he reported to work and he introduced me to Mr. Cavallo, who owns the place. I had a talk with Mr. Cavallo—and liked him. And I liked the place; it at least looks respectable. And he must have liked me; he offered me the job. So I said I'd take it if he could hold it open a week so I could give Mr. Starlock notice—and he said he would. That's all, and I start tomorrow evening."

"What if you find out it's rougher than you think—customers pawing and all that?"

"I can take care of myself, Ed, if something like that is occasional and not serious. I suppose you have to expect at least something of that in a job like that. If it's too rough—well, I'll just quit and find myself another job."

We were almost to Ireland's by then, so I didn't carry on. Mentally I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd made the first hurdle, and without trying. She'd explained to me, and without my even asking, what had worried Starlock: why she'd lied to him. Now I could tell him that at least as far as that angle was concerned she was leveling with me, and that meant he'd keep me on the job. A job I was beginning to like more and more.

We checked her coat—exposing beautifully creamy bare arms, shoulders, and back above the peppermint taffeta—and were led to a booth. But the place was fairly busy and no waiter came right away, so I reopened the meeting.

"Now about this big, friendly, Newfoundland dog of yours, Wanda. You suspected me of an ulterior motive in getting acquainted with you—and rightly, as it happened. What puts him above suspicion?"

"Why—he was living there when I came, and I picked that place accidentally; no one sent me there. So how could he be involved?"

I said, "He was not there when you came. You've been there four weeks and Mrs. Czerny told me Blackie came there three or three and a half weeks ago. He might have been there only a day or so when he managed to get acquainted with you. And, by carrying your suitcases, to learn which room you had."

She frowned slightly, "I—didn't know that. There are quite a few people rooming there and naturally I didn't get to know them all, even by sight, the first week. When I met Blackie that evening I guess I just assumed that he'd been there all along. He didn't say anything about having just moved in."

"He wouldn't have, if we grant him an ulterior motive in doing so. Now another question. You said your room there was burglarized once. Was that

before or after Blackie knew which room it was?”

“Why—after. But he couldn’t have done it. It happened while I was having a date with him, my second one.”

“Don’t you see that makes it even more suspicious, Wanda? Listen, if Blackie did move in there because you had, if his interest in you is more than meets the eye, then he’s not alone on whatever’s going on. He’s not a solo operator—at least not on any operation bigger than a mugging job; he’d be working for or with someone else. He’s strictly small time, except for his muscles.

“So if your room was to be searched, someone else would do it, on his tip-off, while he made sure you were away and established himself an alibi at the same time. Did you report the burglary to the police?”

“Yes, and two men came right away. But I don’t think they were very impressed—or even quite believed me. You see, nothing had been taken. The only way I knew somebody had been there was that some things weren’t exactly as I left them. Not stirred up, but moved slightly. They probably thought I was imagining things—but I wasn’t. But—do you think Blackie, even if he’s what you think he is, could have had any ulterior motive in getting me the cigarette girl job where he works?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I hope to find out. Or we hope to find out. Don’t be startled tomorrow night if you see the detective who followed you last night—my uncle—in the club. He knows Cavallo and is going to have a talk with him. Until then let’s put Blackie in abeyance. We’ve got a lot of other things to talk about.”

CHAPTER SIX

“Goodie, now you’re going to rope me. How do you go about it?”

I saw a waiter approaching our booth, finally. I said, “The first step in roping is to start mellowing you with a strong drink. What’ll you have? Manhattan, martini?”

She said a martini would be fine and I went along with the idea and ordered two of them.

“And the next step?” she asked, when the waiter had left to go to the bar.

“The next step is to gain the subject’s confidence by talking about oneself. Or are you interested in me? Should we skip that?”

“I’m interested. Talk.”

I talked, and told her quite a bit. All of it true—except that I skipped the fact that Uncle Am and I had worked for Starlock before we started our own agency. There wasn’t any real reason now for keeping Starlock out of it, but I’d told him I would.

By the time I’d finished—not my whole biography, but the high points of it, such as they were—our cocktails had come and we’d each taken a few sips.

Wanda took another. “And now I’m supposed to tell you my life? I’m afraid it’ll be a dull story, at least up to six weeks ago. Nothing much had happened to me up to then. Except my mother’s death twelve years ago, when I was ten. That was the year after my father was elected city treasurer for the first time.”

“Your father kept you with him, straight through after that?”

“Yes. With the help of a housekeeper until recently, just a few years ago. Then, when one left us, I insisted that I was a big girl and could take over the house myself. And I did.”

“And went to college too?”

“Yes, but I was taking a light course, the minimum number of subjects, so I had enough time to be a homemaker for us too. Anyway the routine homemaking. We found a woman who came in one day a week to give the house a thorough cleaning.”

“It was a music college you went to. What’s your instrument, Wanda?”

“Piano. Why? Do you play anything?”

“Trombone, a little. Uncle Am gave me one seven years ago and I’ve played it, or played with it, ever since.”

“How well do you play? Without being modest about it?”

“Fair,” I said. “I can read notes. Or play by ear. I’d say I could play with a

jazz band or dance orchestra if I had to, and get by, as long as it wasn't a group that went in for too much improvisation. I can do a little of that, but not much."

"Are you going on studying it?"

"No. I wouldn't want to become a pro, even if I could. I play for my own amazement, and I'll settle for that. I like being in business with Uncle Am. It's a poor thing but our own. And I like being a detective. Most of the time it's dull, sure, but it has its moments. Like now—sitting across from a beautiful girl, about to order a wonderful dinner, and all on the expense account. Do you play only classical stuff, Wanda, or do you go in for jazz too?"

"I play both, I'm afraid I'm not professional quality either, though."

I caught our waiter's eye and held up two fingers for refills on the martinis. I said, "Maybe we can play together sometime, just for the hell of it. If we can find a piano to use."

"I'm going to get one. That's one reason, Ed, I wanted this cigarette girl job. If it works out and if the tips run what Mr. Cavallo said they would, within a few weeks I'll be able to start looking for a small apartment instead of that room. And the minute I get one, in will go a spinnet—even though I'll have to buy it on time payments—so I can start playing again. But you'll probably be off this case by then."

"Which doesn't mean I can't still see you, does it? I don't have dates only when they're in line of duty. But about the piano—isn't there one at the Freeland house you could use instead of having to buy one?"

"There's one there, of course. But until the estate is settled I'm not supposed to take anything out of the house—except my own clothes and personal property, of course. Besides, the piano there is a baby grand. I doubt if I'll be able to afford an apartment big enough to hold a baby grand, even if my tips run higher than Mr. Cavallo's prediction."

"I hope they do," I said. "Want another drink or shall we order food?"

"I think we'd better order, Ed. I've never eaten here before. What would you recommend?"

"Any sea food. But lobster is their specialty. Do you like lobster?"

"Are you going to have one?"

"I'm going to have lobster Newburg," I said. "I'm a coward. I'm too inexperienced with lobsters to feel like fighting one in public."

She felt the same way and would go along with me on the Newburg; I got our waiter and we ordered without even having to look at the menus. When he left I said, "One more question about you, Wanda. But it's a personal one—don't answer it if you don't want to. Do you have any swains or beaus current? Outside of Blackie, if you want to call him one. And me, if you'll let me be one."

"No, Ed, not current ones. I have had, of course; I'm twenty-two and I haven't lived in a vacuum. But at the time of Dad's death there wasn't anyone I was serious about. And when I left Freeland and moved into Chicago I

thought it was best to make a clean break, new friends, a new start.”

“Because your father’s name is under a cloud there?”

“Partly, I guess. Of course some of our friends there don’t believe he took the money, or at least say they don’t. But even so, and even if and when my father’s name is cleared, I don’t ever want to live in Freeland again. So why keep any ties there?”

“Haven’t any of these friends called you?”

“A few of them. To be exact, I’ve had four calls, two at the office and two at the rooming house. Two were from family friends—friends of my father—inviting me for dinner and an evening. And two were from boys I’d known, wanting dates. But I didn’t accept any of them. Now, after tomorrow morning no one there will know how to reach me at work and, after I get myself an apartment, no one will know how to reach me and I won’t be bothered any more.”

“How about the lawyer handling the estate? Won’t he have to know?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Carstairs. I’ll have to tell him if I move, but I’ll ask him not to tell anyone the new address. And the Freeland police; I promised them I’d let them know if I moved again. But where I work or what I do is my own business; I don’t intend to tell either of them that.”

“Sooner or later someone from Freeland who knows you will come into the Gray Goose and see you, and the cat will be out of the bag.”

“That could happen, but it’s not too likely. And it doesn’t matter seriously if it does. But I don’t want any of them coming in because I work there, so they’ll have to find out by accident if at all.”

“And aside from Blackie and me have you made any new friends yet?”

“No, I haven’t. I haven’t tried, as yet. Oh, there are a few people at the rooming house that I’ve talked to and know by name, but I don’t think any of them are ones I’m likely to become permanently friendly with or even see again after whenever I move from there. And I’ve never become friendly enough with any of the people at Mr. Starlock’s to see them outside of working hours. Oh, I might if I were staying there longer. But a month isn’t long enough to make any permanent friendships in an office.”

Our food started to arrive then and we quit talking for a while. I don’t care to talk much while I’m eating—especially talk that requires concentration, as my next questions would, and especially when I’m eating good food, as we were. And apparently Wanda felt the same way about it and was quiet too.

Finally we were through and lighted cigarettes.

“That was wonderful,” Wanda said.

“Shall we top it off with brandy or a B. and B.?”

“First, let’s decide what we do next.”

“Anything you want to do. But what’s that got to do with a brandy?”

“Just that I’d rather skip it if we’re going somewhere to do any more drinking. If we’re not, I’ll have one. What would you like to do, Ed?”

“Go to a quiet place where we can keep on—or rather resume—talking.

And I guess that does mean another drink or three so okay, let's skip the brandy. Know a place called Tom, Dick, and Harry's?"

"Yes, on State Street near Grand. That is, I know it from the outside, from walking past. I've never been in."

I said, "The inside is nicer than the outside. And it's quiet."

She gestured toward her bare shoulders. "I wouldn't be overdressed?"

"Oh, no. People drop in on their way to or from theater parties or other affairs. We've seen plenty of people in evening dress there."

"We? Oh, you mean you and your uncle. You go there a lot?"

"Fairly often. Does it sound okay?"

She said that it sounded fine, so I got the check and paid it, and then bought her coat back from the check room and helped her on with it.

Again the distance was only a few blocks, so we walked. The back corner booth, the one in which Uncle Am and I had sat last night, was vacant so we took it. And ordered highballs.

"Now," I said. "Tell me about your father, Wanda."

"There isn't much to tell—except that he was a good man, Ed. Kind and considerate. Maybe most people would have thought him a little on the stodgy side, a bit of a Babbitt. I guess a lot of accountants—and treasurers and bankers—are that way. But it's absurd to think of him as an embezzler—no matter what the evidence against him is or seems to be. You don't really think he took that money, do you, Ed?"

I said, "I didn't know him, Wanda. So I have no opinion. From what you tell me, it doesn't sound likely. But let me say this much in defense of my client's suspicions. Embezzlers aren't the usual type of criminal at all. Usually they're men such as you describe your father to have been. They have to be to reach positions of trust where they can embezzle money in sizable quantities. And sometimes being so respectable, having to be so respectable eventually causes something to slip inside of them. Inside them they build a secret life, a secret dream. It may come on gradually or suddenly. Sometimes the very pressure of respectability does it. You know the old limerick:

"There once was a monk in Siberia

Whose life became drearier and drearier;

Till he burst from his cell

With a hell of a yell,

And eloped with the Mother Superior."

She smiled. "I've heard that limerick, yes. But I can't see my father doing anything like it. I think he was satisfied with the life he had, the position he had. I don't think he had built up repressions."

"What did he do for excitement?"

"He was a Sunday golfer. He used to bowl one evening a week, up to about a year ago when he got a touch of bursitis in his right elbow. It wasn't bad

enough to stop his golf playing, although it probably hurt his score some, but he quit bowling until and unless he got over it. And he played cards some, usually at home."

"You mean the two of you? Or just when you had company?"

"Just when we had company—I don't care too much for cards and we didn't play any two-handed games. But we knew couples who played bridge and—oh, maybe once every couple of weeks either they'd be at our house for an evening or vice versa—and we'd play. Never more than a tenth of a cent a point; you couldn't call it gambling."

"Did your father drink?"

"Socially, yes. We kept liquor on hand but I never knew him to take a drink unless we had company, or were visiting someone. And he didn't hang out at taverns."

"How old was your father?"

"Forty-six. He'd have been forty-seven next month."

"And your mother had been dead for twelve years? Didn't he ever consider marrying again? Do you think he remained celibate all that time?" I saw her frown and said, "You don't have to answer that if you don't want to, Wanda. But if you do answer it, tell me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"All right, Ed. The honest answer is—I don't know. There's a woman—a very nice woman; I know and like her—with whom he was very friendly the last few years of his life. But whether there was any physical affair going on between them, or just companionship, I don't know. And didn't care to know; it was none of my business, and I wouldn't have blamed him if there had been."

"Tell me about her."

"In a minute. Let me cover the previous period first. And the answer is that I don't think he had any affairs. I know he was never away all night and when he wasn't home for an evening, I usually knew where he was, how to reach him. Not every single time; that's why I can't be positive."

"But about Mrs. Agnew—"

I interrupted. "Married, or a widow?"

"Not exactly either. Technically married. But her husband is in an insane asylum, has been there six or seven years, and is probably incurable. So for practical purposes she's a widow, except that she can't remarry. That is, she might get a divorce, but she's Catholic, so she can't. You're not Catholic, are you, Ed?"

"No," I said. "I'm not much of anything."

"I guess I'm not either. But about Mrs. Agnew. I don't think she's an especially devout Catholic, but—well, if you're Catholic at all, you can't get a divorce. Unless under even more special circumstances than hers."

"You think your father and she might have married, if she could have?"

"I honestly don't know, Ed. I think they might have; they were both alone,

I imagine sometimes lonely. She's forty, incidentally. They might have married even if there was only companionship between them, up to that point."

"How often did they see one another?"

"Once or sometimes twice a week, Dad would go over to her place to spend the evening. But he always told me where he was going, so I'd know where to reach him; he wasn't secretive about it. And he never stayed awfully late; usually he was home by eleven o'clock, or not much later."

"Did she ever come to your place?"

"A few times, but always when we were having other guests too. But Dad always went alone to her place—so that's why I feel there could have been something between them. I—I'm afraid I rather hoped there was, for his sake. After all, my mother had been dead a long time."

"But didn't he take a chance on compromising her—and himself—by spending evenings that often?"

"A pretty small chance. You could call it a calculated risk. You see, we lived only two blocks from her on the same street, way out on the west side of Freeland in a neighborhood that isn't built up yet, and there aren't many houses in between. And she lives alone in a small cottage. He could have been seen going in or coming out, but—by anyone who knew him or her at least—the odds were pretty much against it. Besides, if he was seen, there shouldn't have been too much of a scandal. Most people who know her in Freeland think she's a widow—and with Dad a widower—"

"Does she lie about it?"

"No. Anyone who knows her well knows the truth about her husband. But most people assume, since she does live alone, that she is a widow. She doesn't lie, but she doesn't go out of her way to correct them."

"I see," I said. "How does she live?"

"How does—? Oh, I see what you mean. She earns her own living; Dad wasn't supporting her. She's head of alterations in a fair-sized women's clothing store in downtown Freeland. She makes, I'd guess, a fair salary, enough to account for the scale she lives on. At least in that sense, she wasn't Dad's mistress."

I nodded agreement, but made a mental reservation. She could have kept her job and kept on living in the same place—especially one so conveniently near and conveniently private for assignations—and have stashed for the future any money or jewelry he might have been giving her. At forty, a woman starts thinking about her future if she hasn't before, even a woman with a fairly good job.

I said, "I guess that gives me something of a picture of your father, Wanda. Next subject—but I guess we need another drink first."

I ordered our drinks. Then I said, "You don't believe your father took the money. All right, let's assume he didn't. The money is missing. Who else could have taken it?"

“That’s the horrible thing, Ed. Offhand, no one else could have. There were exactly six people, counting Dad himself, who worked in his department. Three of them were girls—typist, biller, comptometer operator. None of them could have possibly performed the various operations required in the embezzlement; the auditors are positive of that. Then there’s an office manager—Tinsley, his name is—but they say he couldn’t possibly have done it either. His work is routine, supervising the girls, buying the office supplies, taking care of the payroll, things like that.

“So that leaves only Dad and his assistant as possibilities. And the assistant seems to be eliminated too, so—”

“Why is he eliminated?”

“Because the embezzlements started about eight months ago—I mean, eight months from the time when they were first discovered; that would make it nearer ten months by now. Dad’s assistant at that time was John Whittaker, and he died five months ago.”

“Died how?” I cut in.

“A heart attack, right at the office. And Dad hired a man named Wilbur Schwarz—it’s spelled S-c-h-w-a-r-z but it’s pronounced the same as the more common t-z ending, Schwartz—for the job and he’s held it since. So there were two assistant treasurers during the period in question—and both of them could hardly have hit on exactly the same system of embezzling—and used the same bank account for the checks.”

“Unless they were conspirators—having known one another before Whittaker’s death, with Schwarz helping from the outside somehow at first, and then applying for Whittaker’s job when he died.”

“The police thought of that. But they were able to find no point of contact between the two, or any indication that Schwarz had ever known Whittaker. Besides, if it had been that way, it was just coincidence that Schwarz got Whittaker’s job. There were forty-some applicants for it, Dad happened to tell me. It pays almost as much as Dad’s job, and carries almost as much responsibility. Besides, there’s another reason why they couldn’t possibly have been conspiring when the embezzlements started. Schwarz was working in New York then and for a few months afterward—the police checked that; they didn’t overlook him.

“But the New York firm he was working for folded up and he came back to Chicago—”

“Came back? Then he’d lived here before.”

“Yes, he’s lived in Chicago before. He’d been in New York only a year. But four months of that year were months in which the embezzlements started, so he couldn’t have been implicated.”

“That does make it sound tough for your father—or for his reputation,” I said. “Do you know how the operation was worked?”

Her eyes widened a little. “Don’t you? If you’re working for the bonding company, didn’t they tell you? Or are you wondering if I’m going to give a

different version?"

"Neither," I said. "Don't forget I'm working for them only on one angle of the case. Which is you. They've probably got a man of their own, one with accounting knowledge, working with the auditors on the Freeland end. But I'm interested, if you'll tell me what you do know about it."

"Not a lot, not the details. Maybe it would take an accountant to understand them, Ed. But I have a rough idea of how it was worked. The missing money wasn't in cash, of course; even a fair-sized city like Freeland doesn't keep that kind of cash in their treasurer's hands. Everything but petty cash is handled by check.

"The missing money went out in the form of checks—about one check a month for eight months, each for an amount somewhere under ten thousand dollars, some as low as two or three, to a mythical company called Midwest Construction Company, presumably for construction work ordered by the city. They were mailed out, and were later deposited in an account opened under that name at the Freeland Merchants Bank, and then the account was later drawn upon—"

"Wait," I said. "Let me get things straight, one thing at a time. You say they were mailed out. How can they be sure of that? And if they are sure, they must have the address they were mailed to."

"The girl who types envelopes and does the mailing remembers the name, knows she typed envelopes and mailed checks to them. But she took the address from the bills that were given her with the outgoing checks, and—doesn't remember it. They've got the address, though; it's a post-office box address at the Freeland P. O. They got it from the bank where the checks were deposited."

I said, "Let's stay in your father's office before we get to the bank. Did he sign those checks?"

She sighed. "Probably. If the okayed bill and an authorization to pay it came with a ready-to-sign check to his desk by the usual channels—or what would seem to be the usual channels—there's no reason why he would have been suspicious or even hesitated to sign the check."

"Not even in amounts like that? And to a company he'd never heard of—at least, the first time?"

"They weren't large checks at all, comparatively. Freeland is a fair-sized city, Ed, and it's expanding. They spend well over a million a year on street and road construction and widening, repairs, things like that. Most of it directly, of course; they have their own Department of Streets and Highways. But it's not big enough to handle everything and a lot of the work is placed, through bids, with independent outside contractors. Dozens of them, maybe, particularly on relatively small jobs. Dad must have signed lots of checks like that and some of them for amounts several times the nine-thousand-odd dollar one that was the biggest single one that went to Midwest Construction. There's no reason why he'd have looked at it twice before signing it if it came

to his desk with an okay and an authorization to pay from the Streets and Highways Department.”

I said, “But wait a minute. That’s a loophole. The operation could have been worked by somebody not in your father’s office at all but by someone in the Streets and Highways Department. Someone there could have sent up fake bills with forged okays and forged authorizations, couldn’t they?”

She shook her head. “No, Ed. I don’t understand the system, but there are checks. Somebody in another department could send Dad a fake bill or two to pay and get by with it, probably, for one month. But not for eight months. I don’t understand accounting, as I said, so I don’t know how it works but there’s an interdepartmental check as of the first of every month. A sheet comes up from Streets and Highways, for instance, itemizing the bills they sent to the treasurer for payment; he has to check it against his own accounts and okay it. If he doesn’t they have to get together and find the discrepancy. For the eight months in question the S. and H. department sent up lists that did not include any payments to Midwest Construction, and got them back with okays. And with his signature. Genuine; or a handwriting expert says it is. Whatever juggling went on was in his department, not theirs.”

“But isn’t that proof your father was implicated, Wanda?”

“I’m afraid a court may think so. That’s the most damaging single thing against him. But those interdepartmental checks were fairly routine; he could have asked his assistant to check the figures and okayed them on his word that they were okay. I think that’s what happened—what must have happened. After all, he couldn’t check everything that went through his hands; he had to trust people under him—or he might as well have tried to do the whole work of the office himself.”

“But that would mean both assistants had worked it that way. And unless you could prove collusion between them—Well, it looks pretty bad, Wanda. How about the eight checks that were mailed out to the mythical Midwest? They must have cleared from the bank. Was your father’s signature on them genuine?”

“They cleared from the bank all right and must have come back with the monthly statements. They’re not listed by name on the statements, of course, but there are amounts that check with the checks. But the checks themselves are missing, were missing when the audit started. And so are the bills and authorizations. If they could be found—there’d be a chance to clear my father.”

“If his signatures on them were forgeries, yes. All right, you say the police found out where the checks were banked. How?”

“Easy. They just phoned banks till they found one that carried an account under the name of Midwest Construction. They’d have covered Chicago and other nearby cities or towns if they’d had to, but they didn’t have to. It was the fourth Freeland bank they tried, the Merchants.”

“Tell me about the account.”

“It had been opened ten months ago, which would have been about the time the first Midwest check was issued—for around three thousand dollars. He—the man who opened the account—had it with him, wanted to open an account with it. He introduced himself as Ralph J. Morrison—I think that was the name—president of a small construction company, the Midwest. Gave them a business and a home address, a few references—all fake, but there no reason why they should investigate, and they didn’t. And a post-office box number that he said he used for all his business mail, and that they should send receipts for the mail deposits and statements to him there.”

“Wouldn’t that have been slightly suspicious?”

“No, Ed. A lot of businesses, legitimate ones, prefer to get their mail through post-office boxes for one reason or another. He put his signature on record with them, signed the check the same way—it had already a rubber stamp endorsement with the company name; he put his signature under it. And left. And the check cleared okay and—”

“Wait. Was the new accounts clerk able to describe him?”

“Only in a general way. That was the only time she ever jaw him. About all the description she could give, after so long a time, was that he was fairly big, middle-aged or a little better, gray or graying hair.”

“Could that description have fitted your father?”

“No, definitely not. Because of size; he was a small man, a little under five feet six. He never weighed over a hundred and twenty pounds. Even with elevator shoes and padded clothes he could never have looked like a fairly big man.

“No, Ed, it couldn’t have been my father; they showed pictures of him to all the clerks at the bank and none of them identified him. Also pictures of Schwarz, even though he was in New York when the account was opened, and of Whittaker, even though he was dead when the man was still coming into the bank once in a while. Even of the chief clerk.”

“And no identification at all?”

“Well—the new accounts clerk said Whittaker’s picture could have been the man. And his general physical description fitted, more or less. But she couldn’t make identification, and none of the tellers thought Whittaker’s picture looked like the man at all, or at least not much like him. And some of them had seen him more recently than the new accounts clerk had. For that matter, since Whittaker’s death—so unless there were two Ralph Morrisons, or men using that name, it couldn’t have been Whittaker who opened the account.”

“Damn interesting,” I said. “Go on.”

“From then on he made all deposits by mail. And he wasn’t in the bank for months. Then he started coming in—occasionally; I don’t know how often—to make cash withdrawals against the account. I guess there was about twenty-five thousand dollars in the account before any of it was withdrawn at all but from then on the amounts drawn were greater than the deposits.”

“When was the last withdrawal?”

“About two months ago, which would have been about two weeks after the last City of Freeland check was deposited—and well after it had cleared.”

“Did it close out the account?”

“All but a few hundred dollars. I guess that was left deliberately; he didn’t want to call attention to himself or the account by closing it out completely.”

“I should think the bank would have noticed an account like that in any case,” I said. “All deposits from one source, all withdrawals in cash.”

“It was none of their business, and there was never anything to call it to their attention. The checks cleared; the withdrawals always left a respectable balance, well in the thousands until the last one. Besides, it wouldn’t have seemed too strange if they had noticed it. A lot of businesses or businessmen have special accounts for special purposes. It isn’t any of the bank’s business even if the purpose is illegitimate—like tax finagling.”

Wanda had turned her head and was looking out of the booth past me, toward the bar. “Ed, isn’t that the man who—I mean, isn’t that your uncle?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I turned around and looked. Uncle Am was at the bar, with a glass of beer in front of him. But not looking our way.

“Yes,” I said. “That’s Uncle Am. But he’s here by accident—not tailing us. He was working on a case this evening—another case, nothing to do with Freeland—and must have decided to stop in here on his way home. As I told you, both come here fairly frequently.”

“Go bring him over, Ed. I’d like to meet him.”

“Sure,” I said. “He’s a wonderful guy. You’ll like him.” I slid out of the booth and went over to Uncle Am.

He wasn’t surprised. “Hi, kid. Saw you—or rather saw Wanda Rogers and knew you’d be sitting across from her—when I came in. How you doing?”

“Fine,” I said. “Wanda wants to meet you. Come on over and sit with us a while.”

“Have you got around to her new job yet?”

“Yes, and it’s okay. I know why she didn’t tell Starlock the truth about it. But come on. If we talk here, she’ll know ‘we’re talking about her.’”

He picked up his glass and followed me back to the table.

Wanda smiled as we came up and slid back in her side of the booth so Uncle Am could sit beside her. She said, “You needn’t introduce us, Ed. Each of us knows who the other is, and we’ve met—in a way.”

Uncle Am grinned. “This way is better.”

And we jabbered about nothing for ten or fifteen minutes until Uncle Am had finished his beer and said he’d better go. But Wanda said, “Wait, Am,”—by that time they were on a first name basis—“I’ve got to find the powder room and you might as well keep Ed amused while I’m gone.”

He let her out and slid in again. “Well, Ed, where’s she working, and why’d she lie to Starlock about it?”

And when I’d explained that he nodded. “Good, then I’ll be seeing her tomorrow night. What are your plans for tomorrow?”

“None,” I said. “I’d better not even ask her for a date.” And I explained that she’d be working two jobs, at Starlock’s until noon and then the night club job in the evening and far into the night, and that she’d want to sleep, or at least to rest, in between. I said, “I might as well get down to the office at nine and keep it open till noon. And I’ll be free to take a job if one comes in.”

“Swell. Then I’ll head from home right out toward Howard and get an early start on my second day. I’ll be able to get in a full day without working

late.”

“When’ll we see one another next?”

“Give me a ring tomorrow evening at Mrs. B’s. I’ll have to go there to dress up a little for the night club bit anyway.

And maybe if our plans and appetites fit we can eat together.”

“Okay,” I said. “Or maybe, if I’m not working, I’ll just go there. There’ll be no point in my hanging around Mrs. Czerny’s.”

“Okay. Anyway, unless I get starved I won’t eat till I see you or hear from you. How are you going to report to Starlock?”

I thought a minute. “I’ll phone him after noon. With tomorrow Wanda’s last day there, she’ll leave on time, and Ben generally hangs around the office for a little while anyway. If I do miss him I’ll phone him at home later.”

Then Wanda was coming back; Uncle Am got up to let her into the seat and couldn’t be talked into sitting down again himself. He left us with a “God bless you, my children,” and took off.

“I like him,” Wanda said, almost before he was out of hearing.

I nodded. “And you’ll like him better if you get to know him better. But where were we? Oh yes, you were telling me about that bank account.”

“I’m afraid I told you all I know about it; I’d finished.”

I said, “Then let’s take a new topic. Your father’s death. Or would you rather not talk about it? I want the whole picture, but I can get the details somewhere else.”

“I’m willing to talk about it, Ed. It was an auto accident. That is, as a pedestrian, he was run down by an auto. And was killed instantly.”

“Have you ever suspected that it wasn’t an accident at all, that it might have been murder—murder that tied in with whatever crooked work was going on in his office?”

“Yes, I did, Ed. Not at first, not until the following week after the funeral, when the shortages came to light at the office. I think the police considered it too. But there just doesn’t seem to have been any way—or any connection.”

“Were there any witnesses?”

“No, except the man who hit him. He was injured too; his car went out of control and hit a tree. He was hospitalized for over a week—no major injury but a few cracked ribs and a concussion.”

“Start from the beginning, Wanda. Let’s see, if I remember the newspaper account at all, such as it was, it happened about eight o’clock, and only about a block from your home. But was he coming home, or walking away from home?”

“Leaving. He said he—”

“Wait. In that case, he’d been home already. Start from the time he got home and take it from there.”

“All right. It was a Tuesday evening. August twenty-second. He came home a little later than usual, not much. About six o’clock instead of half past five.”

"Had he phoned to tell you he'd be late?"

"No, because being that much late didn't matter. We usually ate at about half past six; he phoned me only if he was going to be later than that."

"And you ate at half past six?"

"No, that night I'd been a little late myself—in getting dinner started, I mean. It was probably seven by the time we ate."

"And everything was normal? I mean, your father seemed perfectly natural, not worried or anything?"

"Perfectly natural. A little preoccupied maybe, but no more than that. And we talked, but not about anything special. I don't think he had any appointment for the evening or any intention of going out or he'd have mentioned it. After we ate—Do you want all these little details, Ed? I don't see how they matter."

"Every little detail," I said. "If only because I like to hear you talk."

"All right. After dinner I cleared the table while Dad went into the living room to read the paper. Then I put on some old clothes, jeans, and went out to the garage to work on my car—"

I interrupted. "Your car? Did you and your father have two cars?"

"No, just one. And it wasn't really my car because it was registered in his name, but he didn't drive so I thought of it as mine. You see, Dad had never owned or driven a car in his life. But I'd learned to drive, in friends' cars, and three years ago, when I was nineteen, I talked Dad into buying a car. We didn't get a new one, but a fairly good used one. It was three years old then, which makes it six. now, but it still runs. I wish I had it, but since we never transferred ownership it's still in Dad's name and so part of the estate, and I can't use it—till things are settled."

"Didn't he even try to learn to drive?"

"Yes, that was the idea when we bought it, that I'd teach him. But driving made him nervous and worried, and it kept getting worse instead of better. When we'd had the car only a few weeks he got into an accident with it—nothing serious, just a bashed fender—and gave up. He said we could keep the car if I'd be the family chauffeur."

"You mean you drove him to and from work in it?"

"Oh, no. He commuted by bus. There's a bus stop just three blocks from the house. Of course if it was raining or snowing hard he'd let me drive him those three blocks in the morning, or meet the bus—he'd always phone and let me know which one to meet—in the evening. But in ordinary weather he preferred to walk. I had the car to myself all day. Of course anywhere we went together, on an evening or a weekend, we used the car and I drove."

"I've got the picture," I said. "But back to that evening. You said you went out to work on the car. Are you a mechanic too?"

"No, but I know a little about cars, I can do simple things, make adjustments. And I'd used the car that day and it hadn't behaved itself very well. I thought that the carburetor was out of adjustment. Incidentally, that's

what was wrong and I did fix it. But I'd been working on the car only about ten minutes—it must have been around eight o'clock, I'd guess—when Dad came to the door of the garage. He said he was going to take a walk.”

“Just that?”

“Just that. Oh, except he said he wouldn't be too long. And we both said good-bye. He went on out the driveway; I didn't see which way he turned, but it must have been west—because the accident happened on a block west, and it must have been only a few minutes later.”

“You didn't hear the accident? I mean, even a block away if the car ran into a tree after hitting him, and in a quiet neighborhood at evening, I'd think you would have.”

“I probably would have except that at the time it must have happened I had the engine of the car running, and I was leaning inside the hood making adjustments on the carburetor with a screwdriver—so I wouldn't have heard anything short of an explosion, a block away.

“Anyway, I finished with the car—ten minutes or so more—and went back in the house. And about another ten minutes later, the police came to notify me. Oh, and in the meantime I'd heard a siren that must have been the ambulance but I hadn't thought anything of it; I didn't realize that it had stopped so close.”

I said, “Let's get back to your father's telling you he was going to take a walk. Did he often take a walk—just for the sake of walking, not to go anywhere—in the evening?”

“Not really often, but once in a while. Often enough so I didn't think there was anything strange about it.”

“In the garage, you couldn't have heard the phone ring—if it did while you were there?”

“No, I couldn't have. The garage is set back from the house; I wouldn't have heard the phone ringing there even if I hadn't been running the engine of the car at the time.”

“Then he might have got a phone call—or made one—that made him decide to go somewhere. To Mrs. Agnew's, for instance.”

“She says she didn't call him, or vice versa. And I believe her—for two good reasons. One is that if somebody did—well, put him on the spot by getting him to go out by making a phone call, it wouldn't have been she. What motive could she possibly have for wanting him killed? Another—if he'd been going there, I'm sure he'd have told me he was going to be at her place a while, not just that he was going to take a walk. He always told me when he went there.”

“All right,” I said. “Now the accident itself. How did it happen?”

“No one saw it, except of course the man who was driving the car that hit him, so that's the only version we have. But the police say it fits, as far as concerns everything they found there. He said—when he recovered consciousness in the hospital and they could question him—that he'd been

driving along at about twenty-five miles an hour, when suddenly a man stepped out from between trees at the edge of the sidewalk right into the path of his car. So close that he wasn't able to slam his brakes on until just about the moment of impact. And that the impact plus the sudden slamming of the brakes made his car swerve, right into a tree."

"And the police accept the story?"

"Yes. They think he was going a little faster than he said, nearer thirty-five than twenty-five, but still not speeding. That is, maybe thirty or a little better at the instant he hit my father, twenty to twenty-five at the moment he crashed into the tree after swerving. But that was only a few yards farther on, and they say you can't slow a car down any faster than that, even slamming on the brakes."

"And they issued no citation?"

"No. It wasn't at a cross-walk or even at a corner. So Dad was jaywalking. And while a driver is supposed to use reasonable care, he can't be blamed if someone steps unexpectedly right in front of his car. Especially if he steps out from between parked cars or something like that. And from between trees at the edge of a sidewalk would be the same thing."

"And especially at night," I agreed. "And—was he wearing a dark suit?"

Wanda nodded.

"Who reported the accident?" I asked.

"The people who live in the house on the next corner, just a little past where it happened. Their name is Wilkins; Dad and I knew them, but only very slightly. They were watching TV but they heard the crash—the car hitting the tree. And Mr. Wilkins ran out to see what had happened, and then went back in and phoned for the police and an ambulance."

"But—why didn't he phone you too? If he knew your father, even slightly, I'd think he would have. Or—sorry to have to ask this—was his face mangled any?"

"No—not that. But Mr. Wilkins didn't see my father's body at all. It was—well, not quite under the car but immediately behind it. And Mr. Wilkins ran up to the car from the front and looked in. He saw the driver thrown up over the steering wheel, either dead or unconscious. He didn't try to move him. He went to the side and reached in, turned off the ignition key so the car wouldn't catch fire. Then he went back in and phoned, didn't go back till the police and the ambulance came.

"Then, when my father's body was found behind the car, he did make identification. But he let the police come to tell me about it, for understandable reasons. It's not a pleasant thing to have to bring bad news—especially when the police are right there and it's their business to do it."

"Then you got to the scene of the accident while things were the way the police found them?"

"Well, they hadn't moved my father's body or the car. But they'd put the driver of the car into the ambulance and it was driving off with him just as I

got there. I never saw him.”

“Not even later?”

“No, not ever. I suppose maybe I should have—made a condolence call while he was at the hospital. After all, if the police verdict was right, the accident was completely my father’s fault and the driver was innocent and a victim—but—well, I was too upset to want to talk to him. I didn’t want to meet the man who’d killed my father, even if the accident was all my father’s fault.”

“Was your father often careless or absent-minded about crossing streets? Wouldn’t that be out of character for a man who got nervous trying to drive a car?”

“I’m afraid he was careless, in that one way. And absent-minded too sometimes, when he was thinking about something. I remember times when I’ve been walking with him and have grabbed his arm to keep him from stepping out into the street without looking both ways. I know that doesn’t seem to tie in with his being afraid to drive a car but—well, people aren’t all consistent.”

I sighed. I don’t like coincidences, and I hadn’t liked the seeming coincidence that Jason Rogers had been killed accidentally just before the lid blew off—and would have blown off in any case—on the embezzlements. But I didn’t seem to be getting anywhere in finding the slightest indication that it was anything but coincidence. If it had been murder, it had been a damned carefully planned one.

In fact, if it hadn’t been a genuine accident, it certainly looked more like suicide than murder. He could have waited until a car came along and stepped in front of it deliberately.

But I didn’t see a motive for suicide. If Rogers had been guilty of the embezzlements—with the aid of an accomplice who used the name of Morrison and handled the banking end of the plot—then he knew the embezzlement would have come to light soon in any case, since the regular annual audit had been due soon. But he’d have known all along, before the deal had started, and would have been planning all along to light out for South America or wherever before that date. And until then he’d have been safe.

I asked, “What do you know about the driver of the car?”

“Almost nothing. His name is John Sohl. He lives in Chicago, not in Freeland. And I think Mr. Carstairs said he was young, in his twenties. Ed, isn’t it getting late? What time is it?”

I looked at my watch. “Still early,” I said. “Not quite half past ten yet. But I’ve been asking you too many questions, making you talk too much. I can’t expect to learn everything you know in one evening—and I wouldn’t want to; I’d rather make the job last a little longer. So let’s forget Freeland and just have fun for the rest of the evening. Go somewhere for a few dances. Okay?”

She smiled. “For a little while. If you’ll get me home by midnight.”

I took her to Smoky Joe’s, which is a better spot than you’d think from its

name. It has a good small combo, and a small dance floor for those who want to dance, and some of the customers do; most come for the music.

We danced a few times—and found we danced well and enjoyably together—but I was glad to find out that she really did like and appreciate good jazz, and we spent more time listening than dancing. What talking we did was purely personal, or about music.

After a while she relaxed and was enjoying herself. She'd been a little tense while we'd been talking about her father and especially about the accident.

I could probably have talked her into staying longer but I kept my promise to get her home at midnight. Or almost that; we left Smoky Joe's at midnight, took a cab, and got to the rooming house by a quarter after.

I walked back with her as far as the foot of the stairs. She took one step up and then turned. "Good night, Ed. And thanks for a nice evening."

"It was better than nice," I said. "When shall I see you again? Not tomorrow, you said. How about Sunday afternoon?"

"All right."

"Would one o'clock be too early?"

"Well—all right; I may not have had too much sleep by then but if the date's just for the afternoon I can get back in time to take a nap before I have to report at the club."

"Fine," I said. "One o'clock it is, and we'll decide then what we're going to do. Good night, Wanda."

And because she was standing on the step her lips were just on a level with mine, and I leaned forward and kissed them. Gently. Or at first gently. She didn't pull back and after a second her lips responded under mine; she put her hands on my shoulders and my arms went around her and it turned into a real kiss. A kiss that might have exploded.

But before it quite reached that point, she broke it. She said, "Good night, Ed," and turned and went on up the stairs.

I went to my own room, under her room, and undressed and got into bed. Thinking, but not about the case I was working on. Thinking about that kiss and still feeling it. Wondering if it was going to lead to something, deciding that it might and that if it did the something it would lead to would be something very wonderful indeed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I opened the office at nine and nothing happened all morning. Except that I decided I might as well save time later by writing out a report for Starlock, and I did. And I made a carbon while I was at it so I could show it to Uncle Am—who'd be interested—and thus save wear and tear on my tonsils by not having to tell him about it. It took up most of the morning because, since I didn't yet know which things might be important to the case and which weren't, I put in everything. Everything, that is, except the final minute of our date. That kiss certainly didn't concern the case and wasn't any of Starlock's business.

At a few minutes after twelve I called Starlock's office. I figured Wanda would have left by then and if her voice did answer the phone I could pretend that it was she I'd been calling, and make some reasonable excuse for making the call.

But Starlock's voice answered. I said, "Ed Hunter, Ben. Is the coast clear?"

"Yes, the girls just left. Did you find out where Wanda is going to be working?"

"I did, but listen. I've got the whole report written up so why don't I drop around with it? That is, if you're going to be there a little while."

"At least an hour. Sure, come on up."

And about twenty minutes later I gave him the report and sat waiting while he skimmed through it. It didn't take him long; he's a rapid and retentive reader.

He grunted. "Good going, Ed. I doubt if there's anything in it Waukegan Indemnity doesn't know already—except about the cigarette girl job—but she sure opened up to you. Keep digging like that and something may come out. Off the record, what do you think—thus far?"

"I don't know whether her father was guilty or not—he could easily have been and the facts are certainly damning against him. But I don't think Wanda's crooked. I don't think she knows he took the money, if he did, or where it is now."

He frowned. "Ed, I don't think she's crooked, either. But she could be keeping something back to protect her father's name. She could know something she won't tell because it would prove him guilty, or indicate that he was."

"Such as the note or letter he left with the lawyer for her, the one that was supposed to contain funeral instructions? I didn't get around to that; I couldn't

cover everything in one evening.”

“Such as that, or something else. You know what I think is the key to this, Ed? This guy Morrison, who did the banking and cashing, the accomplice. However things were worked at the treasurer’s office, he couldn’t have been anyone who worked there. Now what if Wanda knew someone who fitted that description and that her father had had dealings with him? Then she’d have a pretty solid idea that he was guilty, even if the note he left for her was only what she said it was, even if she doesn’t know where the money is.”

I nodded. “Ben, I’d like to talk to someone who’s on the inside on this case, get a version of things to check with what Wanda’s told me and whatever else she does tell me. I can spot a discrepancy then, if there is one, and know what questions to concentrate on.”

Starlock thought a minute. “Harry Koslovsky, our client, would be your best bet. He’s manager of the company’s Freeland office. He’s probably been as close to the case as any other one person, ever since it broke. He’s worked with the police and the auditors.”

“When could I talk to him?”

“Their office would be closed now—it’s closed all day Saturday. Would Monday do?”

“It’ll do if it has to do. But my next date with Wanda is tomorrow afternoon. I’d rather talk to him this afternoon or this evening, before that next date. And I’m not doing anything else today anyway; I’d go out to see him if I could talk to him at home. Do you know how to reach him?”

“I can try. He lives somewhere in Freeland.” He picked up the phone, got the Freeland operator to ask for the listing and a minute later was talking to Harry Koslovsky.

He hung up and turned to me. “He’ll be home this afternoon, but not this evening. You heard me tell him one of my operatives wanted to talk to him, so don’t confuse the issue by saying you’re subcontracted. And go along with the one lie I told him and don’t cross me up on it. An omission rather than a lie; they don’t know that Wanda knows you’re a detective. They think it’s a straight roping job. Come to think of it, you should key Wanda in on that too. In case, for any reason, she should ever talk to Koslovsky again.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks a lot, Ben. I’ll go right out there.”

“Might as well wait. I’ll be leaving here in a few more minutes, and I brought my car in today. I can run you out and get you there at least as soon as you’d get there by bus. I got the address when I got the listing, and it’s right on my way home.” He handed me back the report I’d given him. “Here, you might as well give him this.”

I said that was swell, and killed time till he was ready to leave. We walked to the parking lot where he’d left his car and he drove us out to Freeland. It was new territory for me; I’d never happened to be there before. He drove through the downtown district and then about a mile and a half beyond stopped in front of what turned out to be an apartment building.

"I won't go in with you, Ed. Promised my wife to take her to do some shopping this afternoon and I'd better get on home. I guess you're big enough to talk for yourself."

I said "Yeah; thanks for the lift, Ben," and got out of my side of the car. But he called, "Ed, just a minute." And I stuck my head back in the window.

"Listen, when you're through talking with Koslovsky, you can take a look at the scene of the accident if you're curious about it. It's walking distance from here. Five blocks west and one block south."

"Maybe I will," I said. "Know Rogers' address?"

"Not the street number. But it's on Linden, first house west of the corner of Barthold Street. South side. Not many houses in the block—and you won't have any trouble spotting where the accident happened; it took quite a bit of bark off the tree the car ran into. Wait a minute." He reached over and opened the glove compartment, rummaged through some folded maps and handed me one. "Street map of Freeland. Bus lines are marked and you'll want it in any case to get back downtown where you can catch a bus for Chicago."

I thanked him and put the map in my pocket. Then I went into the apartment building and started looking at the mailboxes till I found Koslovsky and an apartment number. I found the apartment, pushed a button, and got chimes. A few seconds later the door opened.

A big man, pleasant looking, asked me, "You the man from Starlock?" and stepped back to let me in when I nodded. "Sit down." He indicated a comfortable-looking chair and I took it; he took another one. He was maybe fifty, bald except for a fringe of hair that hadn't started graying yet. He had sharp, alert-looking eyes.

"My name's Hunter, Mr. Koslovsky," I said. "Did Ben Starlock tell you what I wanted to talk to you about?" I knew Starlock hadn't, but I thought it as well not to let him know I'd listened in.

He said, "Just that it's about the Rogers case. I presume you're the op he assigned to rope Wanda." And when I nodded, "All right. What do you want to know?"

"Everything," I said. And told him what I'd told Starlock, that the more I knew about the facts of the case the better I'd be able to spot a false note in anything Wanda told me, and would know better what points to follow up in talking to her.

He sighed. "That's a big order; it's going to take some talking. And I was just thinking about having a highball—will you have one with me? I won't tell Starlock on you if it's against his rules for an operative to drink on duty."

"Fine," I told him. And he excused himself and went to make the drinks. As a matter of fact neither Starlock nor Hunter & Hunter has any rule against drinking on duty, if one is drinking with a subject, friendly or otherwise. A subject—or even, as in this case, a client—is likely to open up, talk much more freely, be in less of a hurry to get rid of you, with a glass in his hand than otherwise. Not to mention the fact that if he's lying or giving you a

runaround he's more likely to make a slip and give himself away. A private detective doesn't have to be a good drinker, but it helps, always thought that city detectives, who do work under such a rule and some of whom actually follow it, are at a hell of a disadvantage.

I looked around the room. It was a nice room and since presumably the rest of the apartment matched, a nice apartment. Koslovsky obviously drew a good salary in his job. And definitely it was a bachelor's apartment. Everything had been chosen and arranged by a man; there wasn't the faintest of a feminine touch anywhere. I got up and strolled over to the big bookcase—I always do when I'm left alone in room that has one. Koslovsky had good taste in reading too. Steinbeck, Hemingway, Maugham, Dos Passos, Wolfe, and such. Some mysteries, but ones by the better craftsmen in that field, writers like Hammett, Chandler, Gault. It wasn't all fiction; there was a whole shelf of books on insurance, insurance law, actuarial mathematics, another shelf on accounting, even some books on criminology. One of the latter struck my eye as something I'd like to read, *The Psychology of the Embezzler*. I considered asking if I could borrow it, but decided I'd see first whether there was a copy the Chicago Public Library next time I went there.

He came back with drinks and we both sat down again. He said, "Skoal," and we each took a sip. Then he said, "You've already made contact with Wanda, talked to her about the case?"

"Quite a bit," I said.

"Good. Then let's start by your telling me what she's told you to date. I'll tell you if there are any discrepancies, and go on from there."

I told him I'd brought my report; I handed it over and he read it.

He whistled softly when he'd finished. "Son, you're a real roper, to get all that in one evening."

I said, truthfully as far as it went, "She seemed to want to talk about it, once we got started. I didn't have any trouble keeping her going. Are there any discrepancies?"

"No, it's true as far as it goes—and I can't even add much. I presume you'll try, next session, to get around to having her tell you about that note or letter her father left for her with the lawyer?"

"Yes, definitely. But I'd like your version of that episode first."

"It's simply this. About three months before his death—Carstairs doesn't know the exact date—Jason Rogers gave him a sealed envelope addressed to Wanda, asked that it be given to her in case of his death. Carstairs put it with Rogers' will, which he was also holding. The will, incidentally, was quite simple—left everything to Wanda, his only surviving relative.

"The morning after the accident—if it was one; let's say Jason Rogers' death—Carstairs phoned Wanda to give her his condolences and to offer his help in making funeral arrangements or whatever. She thanked him and said she'd come into his office and talk it over with him, and she did. They discussed the funeral arrangements and he said he'd take care of them—it

would be paid out of the estate, of course—and then, before she left, he remembered the matter of the letter and gave it to her.

“She opened it and read it, across from his desk, but made no comment on it, just put the envelope and letter into her handbag. That’s Carstairs’ version of what happened.”

“And does Wanda’s differ?”

“No. Of course she wasn’t asked about that letter until some days later, after the shortages in the treasurer’s office had come to light. And then her story was that the note had just concerned funeral arrangements, in case of his death. That all it said was that he wanted a simple ceremony, not a big funeral, and wanted her to be sure that she remembered that they owned a plot in Spring Grove Cemetery and that he wanted to be buried there, beside his wife. And that she didn’t show the letter to the lawyer or bother to tell him what was in it, because those were the arrangements they’d already decided to make. At least as far as concerns place of burial. It wasn’t too simple a funeral—but then she didn’t think it should be, regardless of his request; after all, he was an honored city official—at least up to that time—and she knew that quite a lot of City Hall would turn out for him.”

“Is there any reason to doubt her story?”

“No major reason, several minor ones. First, if that’s what the note had said, and all it had said, wouldn’t it have been natural for her to have shown it to Carstairs, or at least, have told him what it was about, at the time? They’d just finished discussing the funeral arrangements, remember?”

“Yes. But it easily might never have occurred to her. Being grief-stricken she might not have thought of mentioning it, since—if that’s what it was—it was irrelevant if it agreed with what they’d already discussed and decided. What else?”

Isn’t it just a little out of character for Rogers to have left a note for his daughter, telling her only that? He knew that she knew where her mother was buried—she admitted they’d been to the cemetery together, although not for several years. And she must have known—in fact she admitted she did know—that he owned the plot there. It’s something he’d just take for granted, wouldn’t he? Not, three months before his death, go to the trouble of leaving a sealed letter with his lawyer to cover?”

I said, “Maybe he didn’t know it was three months before his death. But—I’ll admit it doesn’t sound like too good a story. Anything else?”

Only that she couldn’t produce the letter when she was asked about it by the police and told them her version of what it was about. Don’t you think she’d have kept the last letter from her father—at least for a little while, instead of throwing it away? No one of those points is much by itself, add them all together and you can see why we wonder if Wanda is telling the truth about that letter.”

I nodded. “Is she right that only her father or one of his assistants could possibly have worked whatever went on in the treasurer’s office part of the

deal? That none of the girls or the chief clerk could have possibly done it?"

"Yes. In fact, I told her that—and about how the checks were cashed, about the outside man who called himself Ralph Morrison, all those details. I saw no reason not to give her the whole picture.

"About the girls—their work was purely mechanical. Not even all three of them in collusion could have engineered getting those bogus construction company checks out.

"As for the chief clerk, he's out too. At least as a lone operator inside the office, working with Morrison outside. Maybe I forgot to tell this to Wanda or maybe she forgot it after I told her but the reason's a simple one. He was off on vacation for the first two weeks of June, and one of the trick checks went out right about the middle of his vacation. And before you suggest that he might have dropped in for a little evening work on his own, he spent those two weeks on Cape Cod—and we've verified that completely."

"Did anyone else take a vacation?"

"Jason Rogers did. The two weeks following that. But no Midwest Construction check went out while he was gone. Of course the girls took vacations but I already explained that they're out. The first assistant treasurer, Whittaker, had the heart attack and died before his vacation came due; he'd put in for September. And of course his successor, Wilbur Schwarz, hasn't worked there long enough to have any vacation coming this year."

I said, "What's your honest opinion, your personal opinion, of the whole deal, Mr. Koslovsky?"

"I think Jason Rogers was guilty. That's the only way I can add it up. And I don't think his death was an accident—I think it was suicide, that he stepped in front of that car deliberately."

I stared at him. "I can see why you think he was guilty. But why suicide? Up to that point he was getting away with what he was doing. He had the money. And still plenty of time before the audit to get away with it."

"Did he have the money? Or did his accomplice double-cross him and run off with it, leaving Rogers to hold the bag? Suppose Morrison hadn't been supposed to be making those cash withdrawals. Rogers had no way of keeping track of the account. Suppose the money was to have accumulated until payoff time, which would have been soon. But Morrison got the idea that he might as well have the whole forty-six grand instead of whatever cut he was supposed to get. Instead of letting it accumulate he drew it out gradually, then took off after the final withdrawal.

"And where would that leave Rogers? With the guilt, and no money to show for it. Exposure and disgrace and jail coming up, no forty-six grand to run with. He could have confessed, in order to implicate his accomplice and identify him so he could be searched for, but what good would that have done him?"

"You think he learned that he'd been double-crossed just the evening of his death?"

“Quite probably. Maybe he’d begun to suspect something—Wanda said he got home a little late and seemed preoccupied, remember? And—I’m guessing here of course—but I’m guessing that while Wanda was out in the garage he either got or made a phone call that told him he was right, at his accomplice had skipped with the swag and without him.

“He went out for a walk, to think—but what was there to think about? He was through. An auto comes along, going fast enough so that if he steps directly in front of it—” Koslovsky shrugged.

It made sense. It did seem to fit the known facts better than anything I’d thought of. I’d looked for a motive for suicide, but I hadn’t thought of that one. I said, “But if you—if your company feels sure of that, why continue the investigation? You bonded Rogers, and if guilty, you’re stuck, even if that story could be proved.”

“Especially if it’s proved. But there’s still Morrison to look for, and he won’t have spent all of that money as yet, by a long sight, maybe not more than a thousand or so of it to date. If he can be found and the money, or most of it, recovered, our liability is reduced by that amount.”

“Then your investigation is concentrating on finding the accomplice, the outside man. Any leads?”

Koslovsky shook his head sadly. “Not a lead. For one thing the description is so damn general it could fit thousands of people, even if none of it was a disguise. With a partial disguise—hell, it could fit me if I wore a gray wig. Especially we’ve been checking on anyone ever associated with Rogers in any way. Some of them fit the description, at least more or less. But one way or another they’re eliminated. Those we couldn’t rule out on other counts, we managed to get pictures of to show to the bank tellers. Not even borderline or doubtful identification. But yes, we’re mostly looking for Morrison. He’s the key to this, whether or not I’m right in thinking he double-crossed Rogers and that Rogers committed suicide when he learned he was left stranded.”

“And—let’s assume for the moment that your guessing is right—where do you think Wanda fits in?”

“I don’t think Wanda had guilty knowledge of the embezzlements while they were going on. I think she did, after she read that letter her father left for her. I think she lied about what was in the letter in the hope that it would protect her father’s name. I think she’s still lying about it, still hoping the court will clear him.”

“But he left that letter three months before his death. What do you think would have been in it?”

“Apology to Wanda for what he was doing—or had done by the time she’d read it. An explanation—if he had any explanation or justification that would make sense to her. A farewell note, in effect—that he didn’t expect her to read until the cat was out of the bag. Of course he told Carstairs it was to be given to her in case of his death, but he wouldn’t have risked saying his ‘disappearance’ or Carstairs would have wondered. And if he’d disappeared,

with forty-six grand, the letter would have come to light anyway. In those circumstances Carstairs might have given it to the police first, but Wanda would have got it, or got to read it, eventually.”

I thought a minute. “But if that’s true, if that’s what the letter was and the reason Wanda’s lying about it, what good will it do you to get her to change her story about it? It would make it completely certain that the courts would decide against Rogers, and completely certain your company would have to make good on his bond.”

“True, but that’s practically certain anyway. Your drink’s gone and so is mine. Have another?”

“All right but a short one for me.”

He disappeared to make them and this time I didn’t go to the bookcase; I sat still and tried to do some thinking.

When he came back with them, he said, “All right, here’s why we want the truth from Wanda, even if it definitely proves her father guilty. She knew him better than anyone else; she’d lived with him all her life. If anyone has even a suspicion who his accomplice was, it would be Wanda. If she knows that her father was guilty she must have some idea who Morrison is. An embezzler doesn’t conspire with a complete stranger.

But as long as she sticks to her lie about that letter and insists she believes her father is innocent she won’t, she can’t, level with us on the rest of it and give us a lead to Morrison. Even if she doesn’t know his name and address, she must suspect who he is and be able to give us a lead to him. And a lead is all we need; we’ll take it from there, find out who he is and then find *him*.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll concentrate on that angle. I’ll try to convince her that if she knows her father was guilty, she and everyone else will be better off if she tells the truth. Of course if the letter was even approximately what you think it was and she admits that now she’s laying herself open to a charge of being an accomplice after the fact and concealing or destroying evidence. I presume I can promise her immunity.”

“Of course. I already have. I tried to talk her into changing her story about that letter. I didn’t get to first base. But then—” He grinned. “I’m not young and handsome like are. And besides, she’ll be talking to you as a friend, not as an investigator.”

I nodded. “While you were making the drinks I was thinking over the score—especially the point of whether anyone besides Rogers could have worked the inside of the deal. I’ll concede that the girls are out, that the office manager is out. And that, except for Rogers, it could only have been worked by *both* of the assistants. But I see one way in which it could have been worked by both of them, and without collusion, without their even having met one another.”

“I think I see what you’re leading up to, Hunter, and if so it’s something we considered—and discarded. But go ahead.”

I said, “The link between them—and the only link between them—could

have been the outside man, Morrison. Let's assume the first assistant—what's his name? Whittaker—started the deal, working with Morrison. Then Whittaker dies of a heart attack. Schwarz gets his job. Morrison could have known Whittaker well enough to have known he worked out the office end of the deal. He could have approached Whittaker's successor, Schwarz, and talked him into carrying on with it."

"That's what I thought you had in mind, Hunter," Koslovsky said. "Yes, we thought of the possibility and considered it. It seems to make sense, unless you examine it closely, unless you consider Morrison's motives."

"Consider: At the time of Whittaker's death, Morrison—whether he was Whittaker's accomplice or Rogers'—had twenty-seven thousand dollars in the bank, in his own name—I mean in the name of Morrison, whatever his real name is. And with Whittaker dead, he could have cashed out, as he later did cash out, with all of it, and with relatively no risk. He'd have been long gone, extremely difficult to trace, by the time the next yearly audit came around a few months later."

"Instead, you suggest he'd have taken the chance of approaching a new man on the chance that he'd up that bank account some—only nineteen more thousand as it worked out—and then have to split the deal with him, getting less than he'd have got otherwise and safely? It doesn't make sense, from Morrison's point of view—a safe twenty-seven thousand that he already had, versus a split on a sum that couldn't have run to too much more."

"Besides, look at the risk he would take approaching a new man to carry on an old deal—and one that couldn't have been carried on more than a few months longer in any case. He put Schwarz in a position, if he approached him, to blow the gaff on him right away and to have cut down his chances of making a getaway with what he had. And, strange as it seems, some men are honest—how could he have known Schwarz wasn't?—and even more of them are afraid to take a chance of getting caught. No, Morrison wouldn't have taken that much of a chance on Schwarz's wanting to carry on with what Whittaker had started. Or, if he had approached Schwarz, he'd at least have drawn out the money he'd banked, ready for a quick getaway in case he was turned down. And all of the withdrawals were after the change from Whittaker to Schwarz in the assistant's job."

I agreed, not too happily. It had been a good idea while it had lasted, but it hadn't lasted long enough for me to think about it from Morrison's viewpoint, as Koslovsky obviously had.

I said, "Okay, Mr. Koslovsky. I guess that's all—Wait, on Jason Rogers' death—accident or otherwise. Do you have any information besides what Wanda told me?"

"Not much. One minor thing, but I don't see how it could fit in or be important, even if true. The people who lived on the corner and who heard the crash as Sohl's car I into the tree—let's see, the name is Wilkins—didn't agree on one point. Mrs. Wilkins said she thought she heard another car driving past

or driving away just after she heard the crash. But she isn't sure—and her husband, to ran outside right after he heard the crash, didn't see any other car anywhere in sight.

“Besides, if she did hear it and he didn't, it doesn't necessarily mean anything. Another car could have been going it, in either direction, about the time of the accident, not have stopped. A lot of people see or hear accidents happen and tend to run away from them instead of toward. They don't want to be held up, become witnesses. If they see something happen—and this applies to honest, if inconsiderate, people as well as to crooks—they'd much rather keep going and not get involved.”

“And Sohl's story? Did he say there was another car anywhere near in either direction?”

“He said there wasn't—at least that there wasn't one that he'd noticed or that he remembered—coming either way. Sohl's story fits all the other facts brought out by the police investigation of the accident, despite what he was.”

“What do you mean, despite what he was?”

“That's right. Apparently nobody told Wanda anything much about Sohl or she wouldn't have had any reason not to tell you. But he was investigated—and he's a fairly unsavory character. More a matter of bad reputation than things written on a police blotter—but there have been s of those, too. No convictions, though. He's a tough from South State Street—his address is the Worth Hotel there, which isn't exactly a Y.M.C.A. He may not be a gangster, but he has connections that way. On his reputation he'd be a dead duck on the accident—except that his story about it fits everything the police found.”

I leaned forward, interested. “Including a good reason for living been in Freeland—and on that street at that time?”

“So the police tell me, and they asked him. I didn't go into details with them because—hell, why should I have? Rogers was killed accidentally or he stepped in front of that car on purpose. And in either case who was driving it doesn't matter. It could have been Jack the Ripper or Billy Graham and the same thing would have happened.”

I saw that my glass was empty and put it down. Koslovsky looked at it interrogatively, but I shook my head. And stood up. I said, “I've taken a lot of your time already, Mr. Koslovsky, and thanks a lot. I've got a much better picture of the situation as a whole than I had. Particularly the possibility of Rogers' having committed suicide because his partner ran out on him; I hadn't thought of that.”

He stood up too. “Nothing else you want to know? That I can tell you, I mean.”

“Not unless there were questions I should have asked you and didn't.”

He shook his head. “I think we've covered everything. Oh, I could look up my notes and give you exact dates of issuance of checks, and of deposits and withdrawals, things like that. But I can't see how, from the angle you're working on, they'd matter. And if anything does come up that might make

anything like that important, call on me again—or just phone me.”

I said I would, thanked him again, and left. Outside, I headed toward the general direction Starlock had indicated, and then checked the map he’d given me. I didn’t know what good it would do me to see the Rogers house or the scene of the accident—or suicide?—but I was so near that I might as well.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

While I walked I thought, and I didn't like what I was thinking. I'd had at least a vague hope that I could end out or prove that Jason Rogers was innocent of embezzlement. I liked Wanda a hell of a lot—and I'd believed her when she'd said that she believed he was innocent. Koslovsky had shaken me.

I found the corner of Linden and Barthold and looked west on the south side of Linden. Starlock had been right that there weren't many houses in the block; specifically, there were three—and one new one still under construction.

But there were, as described, trees between the sidewalk and the curb, about every twenty feet. Medium-sized trees; I didn't know what kind they were, but, since it was Linden Avenue, they should have been linden trees if they weren't.

The first house was on the second lot; it would be the Rogers house. A modest enough home for the treasurer of a city, even a small city. Smallish, two-story house, neither cheap nor expensive. Probably three bedrooms. Probably—since it would have been built some years ago—built for ten or twelve thousand. And back of it, to one side and at least twenty feet behind the house, was the garage Wanda had mentioned. No, from that distance, and even without a car engine running, she couldn't have heard a phone ring inside the house.

The grass needed cutting, but I didn't feel like breaking into the garage for a lawnmower to do the job. It was going to be sold to settle the estate, in any case; Wanda would never live there again and a cut versus an uncut lawn doesn't much change the price a house will bring. And anyway—if the courts decided Jason Rogers was responsible for the embezzlement—the estate wouldn't go to Wanda; it would go toward making up the money he'd embezzled.

I walked past it with no notion of trying to find a way in. The police had searched it, and—unless Wanda was mistaken or lying—it had also been burglarized. I wasn't going to find anything there that police and burglars hadn't found. There was a baby grand piano, of course, and I'd have liked to swipe it and give it to Wanda, but I doubted if I could get away with it, or carry it to Chicago if I did.

The next house, a few lots away, looked occupied—there were diapers hung out on a line in the side yard—and then, another few lots past it, the house under construction. But was Saturday afternoon; no one was working

on it.

Beyond it was a wider vacant space—seven or eight or nine lots—and then the corner house which would be that of the Wilkins family, the people who'd heard the accident and reported it. About halfway there I cut out into the street—there wasn't any traffic at all and hadn't been since I'd reached the block—and started looking for a tree with some bark knocked off it on the street side. I found the tree, but it didn't tell me anything except that it was the tree Sohl's car had run into after running into or over Jason Rogers. And that the impact had been a fairly hard one, at least twenty or twenty-five miles an hour even after brakes had no doubt been slammed on. The tree was about five inches in diameter; probably if the impact had been much harder it would have broken off. As it was, there was quite a bit of bark gone, but the tree would live. So would John Sohl, the driver of the car.

But not Jason Rogers, accident victim or suicide. I walked back to about the point where, according to Sohl's story and all the evidence, he'd been hit. But the spot didn't tell me anything. If there were any tire or skid marks they'd have been worn off long since, even on a quiet street like this. And did I expect to find bloodstains, after six weeks and half a dozen early fall rains?

I went back to the sidewalk and went on. There wasn't any reason to stop in the Wilkins' house; I couldn't think of any questions I wanted to ask them to which I didn't already know their answers. And besides, their garage door was open and the garage was empty; they'd probably gone for a Saturday afternoon drive and weren't home.

I reached toward my pocket for the map to see which way to walk to the bus line and then I remembered something and didn't reach for it. Wanda had told me that Mrs. Agnew, her father's woman friend, lived on the same street and only two blocks away. That would make it automatically in this direction, because Linden dead-ended one block the other side of the Rogers house. Of course she probably wouldn't be home—she was head of the alterations department of a downtown women's clothing store and would surely be working on a Saturday afternoon, the busiest time for stores. But what did I have to lose walking another block?

I walked another block. There were exactly as many houses in it as in the block the Rogers had lived in, three lived-in ones and one under construction. And I didn't have any trouble identifying Mrs. Agnew's because Wanda had described it as a cottage, and it was the only one-story house in the block.

It was on the other side of the street from the Rogers place. Which meant that Rogers could have been heading for it the night of his death; he could have crossed over anywhere and had—if his death really was accidental (I was coming more and more to agree with Koslovsky's suicide hypothesis)—picked exactly the wrong place at the wrong time to do his crossing.

It was a neat little cottage of probably three rooms over all. No garage, but there was a carport—and a car in it. I'd guessed wrong in thinking that she'd surely be working on a Saturday afternoon.

I went to the door and knocked. A woman, a nice-looking woman, opened it. She wasn't beautiful but she was definitely attractive. Wanda had said Mrs. Agnew was forty, but she could easily have passed for thirty-five; you wouldn't have called her a liar if she'd said she was thirty. She had a pleasant face and a pleasant smile—even while she didn't know whether I was serving a summons or trying to sell her magazines.

I introduced myself, and told her I was working for Waukegan Indemnity. I said, "I know that another representative of ours has already talked to you, Mrs. Agnew, but—"

"Come in. Don't stand there, Mr. Hunter. Of course I'll be glad to talk to you."

The living room, neat but not gaudy, was just beyond the door and we sat down. I led off with a song and dance about just having been assigned to the case and, although of course I'd read our reports, I wanted to form my own opinions firsthand and hoped that—

I didn't finish it because she cut me off, quietly. "Of course, Mr. Hunter. You needn't explain. I'm glad to talk, to anyone, at any time, if I can help clear Jason Rogers' name. And it should be cleared. He didn't take that money, you know. He just wasn't the kind of person who'd do anything like that."

I said, "I hope you're right, Mrs. Agnew. If only—since I didn't know him personally—because it would be to our company's interest to be able to prove that he didn't. Would, you rather I asked questions, or just let you talk?"

"Either. But I'll start off by answering the question that you might find embarrassing to ask. I was not Jason's mistress. Nor were we having an affair—if you interpret mistress to mean that he was supporting me or contributing to my support. We were close friends, very close friends."

I asked, "Do you think that, if circumstances had made it possible—if you'd been free, I mean—he might have asked you to marry him?"

"I'll be honest, Mr. Hunter. I'm almost sure that he would have. There was affection between us. I won't say love—because neither of us dared, under the circumstances, to think of love. But I think he would have wanted to marry me, if possible, and I'll be frank enough to say that I'd have accepted him. But it happened too late."

"What happened too late?"

"My husband's death." Suddenly there were tears in her eyes. "He died only ten days ago, in the asylum."

So she was free now, too late. Were the tears for her husband? I didn't think so. She couldn't have loved him and still have been willing to have married Jason Rogers if she could have done so. The tears were for Rogers, and for what might have been.

I said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Agnew."

"You need not be. It was a merciful thing. There are insane people whose insanity is of a type that makes them happy or at least contented. My husband

was not one of them.”

I cleared my throat. Discussing the mercy of God wasn't going to get me anywhere, and that wasn't what I'd really meant anyway. I'd meant that I was sorry Jason Rogers had died too soon. But why, if I thought he was guilty and on the verge of a runout if he hadn't died?

I said, “About the night of Mr. Rogers' death, Mrs. Agnew. I understand you had not phoned him, or he you, that you had no previous engagement and weren't expecting him.”

“That is right.”

“But could he have been coming here, without phoning? Did he ever do that?”

“Occasionally, yes. He could have been coming here. Usually he phoned. But once in a while he'd have in mind to take a walk and then decide to drop in—in that case usually briefly. If he'd intended to spend the rest of the evening here I'm sure he would have told Wanda where he was going.”

“Or might have had in mind to phone Wanda from here to tell her, if he did find you home and decided to stay the rest of the evening.”

“I suppose that's possible

I said, “By the way, Mrs. Agnew, how come you're not working today? I should think Saturday would be the busiest day in a clothing store.”

“It is, but my assistant can handle things. We alternate on taking Saturdays off; today happens to be my turn. May I offer you some tea, Mr. Hunter? Or—I don't have hard liquor in the house but I have a bottle of sherry if you'd prefer that.”

“No thanks,” I said. “And I've got only a few more questions to ask anyway. One of them is—did Mr. Rogers ever discuss his work, the treasurer's office, with you?”

“No, not to speak of. A casual remark that it had been a busy day or that he'd had to work overtime, something like that.”

“Or did he ever discuss his subordinates with you?”

“Again, only casually, a mention or two. I know that he didn't like Mr. Whittaker, his assistant for a while, very well personally, but thought he was efficient and very good at the job. And Mr. Whittaker's successor—what was his name? The one who had the accident?”

“Schwarz, Wilbur Schwarz. But what's about Schwarz having had an accident? I hadn't heard about that.”

“He was struck by an automobile too—a drunken driver in that case—just a short time before Jason's death. He was injured—a broken arm—and he was away from work for a few days or maybe it was a week. Naturally Jason mentioned at—it gave him a lot of overtime work during that period, but I don't recall anything else he ever told me about Mr. Schwarz.

“You said it was a short time before Mr. Rogers' death. How short a time?”

“I believe about two weeks. Not over three. At any rate he was back at work, although with his arm in a cast before—what happened to Jason.”

“Do you know where Schwarz lives?”

“No, I don’t. I imagine in Freeland—and there’s a Freeland phone book on the stand right beside you there. And the phone, if you want to use it.”

I reached for the phone book and looked for the name. There were several Schwarzes listed but only one Wilbur. I read off the address to Mrs. Agnew and asked her if she knew where it would be. “Why, right near here. Only about three blocks. One block back that way on Linden—” She indicated the direction from which I’d come; one block back would be the corner near which Rogers had been killed. “Turn left, and go—let’s see; it would be about a block and a half.”

“Is that the direction I’d have to walk to the bus line?”

“Yes; it’s just half a block short of the bus line street.”

“Then it’s on my way and I won’t bother to phone him. I’ll just take a chance of finding him home.” I stood up. “Thanks an awful lot, Mrs. Agnew.”

She walked to the door with me. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help you.”

“Maybe you have helped me,” I said. “Good-by, and thanks again.”

Maybe she had helped me, but I didn’t see how as yet. What connection could an accident to Wilbur Schwarz have with the embezzlement, or with the death of Jason Rogers? None that I could see. Except that it was a coincidence, and I don’t trust coincidences.

Still, Koslovsky would certainly have known about Schwarz’s accident, and must know all the circumstances of it. And he must have decided it had no possible bearing or he’d certainly have mentioned it.

I found the address; it was a house about the size of Rogers’, but a little newer. I rang the doorbell and waited. After about a minute, just as I was reaching to ring again, a woman opened the door.

She was drunk, not falling-down drunk, but obviously at least two sheets to the wind. It showed in her eyes and in her face, in the way she swayed slightly as she stood there. She was barefooted. She wore a thin wrapper tied around the waist and—I had a strong hunch—nothing under it. She could have been anywhere in her thirties.

“Mrs. Schwarz?” I asked. And when she nodded, “My name is Hunter. I’m from the Waukegan Indemnity Company. Is your husband here?”

“Come in.” She stepped back from the door and I went in. “Sit down, Mr.—What’d you say your name was? The hell with it. What’s your first name? Easier to remember.”

“Ed,” I said. “Is your husband home?”

“Sit down, I said. He’ll be back in a few minutes. Back in a minute.” The “back in a minute” apparently applied to herself for she padded out of the room.

I took a chair and looked around. It wasn’t a bad room; the furniture was good. But it was a bit messy and needed Straightening up, if not cleaning. Also, there was much too much chintz.

Mrs. Schwarz came back but said, “Back in a minute,” again and went on

through the room. She'd put on slippers and, I think, had run a comb through her hair. But she hadn't changed her costume otherwise.

The doorway through which she'd made her second exit apparently led to a kitchen; I heard the sound of glassware and a moment later she came back with a tumbler in each hand, about an inch and a half of clear liquid in each tumbler. She handed me one.

"All the gin that's left. That's where Wilbur went. Sent him out for more gin. And ginger ale. I like ginger ale in my gin."

"So do I," I said. "Maybe we'd better wait till he comes back and then we can have mixed drinks."

She sat on the sofa and I was glad I hadn't sat there. She "No, he'll be minutes yet. Old Wilbur's a slowpoke. We'll drink these while we wait. What you want to see him about?"

"Just to ask him some questions, Mrs. Schwarz."

"Call me Margie, Ed. You know Wilbur?"

"No, I've never met him."

"Ask me. I'll tell you anything about him you want to know. What do you want to know?"

I said, "Anything you want to tell me."

"Been married to him fifteen years. Married him in Milwaukee, both of us born and raised there. Fifteen lousy years. He's a stick-in-the-mud, won't ever make any money. And tight with what he does get. Got a thousand dollars last month—a whole goddam thousand bucks—and what did I get out of it? A few dresses and a coat. A cheap fur coat, not a good one."

"Was the thousand a settlement for his accident?"

"Sure, and he should have got more, lots more. No guts, didn't want to go to court. No-Guts Wilbur Schwarz."

She drained the last of her drink and leaned forward to put the glass down on an already cluttered coffee table. Her robe came open as she leaned and reached; I'd been right in thinking she wore nothing under it. Unless maybe panties; I couldn't see quite that far down.

She straightened up and looked at me a bit owlishly.

"Don't get me wrong, Ed. I love my husband. He's good to me and he buys me liquor and sometimes even drinks with me. I love Wilbur. But I like other men a lot better. Especially Wilbur's cute little baby brother Julius. And you. I could like you, Ed." She patted the sofa beside her. "Come over and sit close to me."

I said, "I don't think I'd better, Mrs. Schwarz, with your husband due any second now."

"Scaredy-cat. All right, then I'll—" She was getting up and probably had the intention of coming over to sit in my lap. But I was saved by the bell. Not literally the bell; a man doesn't ring the bell before entering his own house—although maybe Wilbur Schwarz should have got into the habit if his wife was in the habit of making passes at guests, right in the living room off the front

door. But he opened the door, came in, and closed it behind him.

At first I thought the man who came in was deformed, and then I saw the reason for the apparent deformity. He had quite a heavy plaster cast on his left arm and left shoulder. He wore a suit coat over the cast. His right arm was normally inside a sleeve, but for obvious reasons his left one wasn't; the left shoulder of the coat was just pulled up over the cast. That was why, at first glance, he'd looked like a lopsided hunchback.

He was of medium height, slender build, looked to be in his late thirties or possibly as old as forty. Brown hair, a saturnine face with a sallow complexion. His eyes were clear; he was, or seemed to be, completely sober. He might have had a few drinks before he'd been sent out for more liquor, but certainly nowhere near as many as his wife had had.

He had the liquor, a paper bag that obviously contained bottles, held under his good arm in a way that had left his hand free to turn the doorknob.

Mrs. Schwarz said, "Wilbur, this is Ed." I'd stood up, of course, and since she'd given me a rather vague introduction I finished it by supplying my last name and that of the company that I told him I was with.

He didn't seem either overjoyed or displeased to find me there, but he nodded politely and then looked past me at his wife. "Take this package, will you, honey? And—you'll have a highball, Mr. Hunter?"

I told him I guessed I could use one. I'd taken only a token sip of the straight gin the woman had given me.

She came toward him and took the package. He said, "And listen, honey, you make three drinks for us. But do me a favor, will you, and close the kitchen door and don't bring ours in till I call you? We'd like to talk privately. Okay?"

She didn't say it was okay, but she didn't argue either. She took the package into the kitchen.

Schwarz took a step backward to the front door and motioned me toward him, then put a finger to his lips. I was puzzled but I went up to him. From the kitchen we could hear the sounds of his wife moving around.

He spoke quietly. "I don't know what you want to talk to me about—but there's one point that *might* come up—and I want to explain it privately. I mean without my wife hearing. After I've explained that we can talk normally and if she overhears anything it won't matter."

I pitched my voice to match his; neither of our voices would have been understandable even if she'd put her ear against the door. I said, "Can I make a guess? You told her you got a thousand dollar settlement from your accident. That does seem rather small. Was it more?"

"Yes, it was five thousand. But if I'd told her that she'd have wanted a mink, a convertible, God knows what all. I thought most of the money should go in the bank for the future or for an emergency. We're solvent, not in debt or thing, but a nest egg is something I didn't have, and—"

"I understand, Mr. Schwarz. I'd have done the same thing." (If, God forbid,

I added to myself, I ever married and found myself with a wife like Margie Schwarz.)

He grinned. "I've had to take a lot of hell for settling for so little—but not four thousand dollars' worth of hell. And the four thousand's safe. Let's see—is there anything else might want to ask about the settlement while we're talking quietly?"

"You made it out of court?"

"Yes, with the company that carried his liability insurance. I might have got more if I'd sued, but it would have been a gamble and you know how long law suits can take and how much they can cost. Anything else?"

"I guess not—about that angle. But it is the accident I want to talk to you about, at least mostly."

"All right. Anything else about it we can talk about openly. Come on and sit down."

We sat down and he said, "All right, what do you want to know about the accident?"

"How it happened. The whole story."

He looked a bit puzzled. "But it must be in your files. I told your local manager everything about it. About a week after the accident and after the shortages turned up at the office."

I nodded. "Yes, I could have read his report, but I didn't, deliberately." And went on to give him the story that I'd just been put on the case and wanted to go over everything with everybody and form my own impressions firsthand.

"But how could an accident to me have anything to do with what you're investigating? Oh, I'm willing to talk about it, but I'm curious on that point."

"It probably hasn't," I admitted. "But it's quite a coincidence, your accident and Mr. Rogers' being so similar and so close together. How long before his did yours happen?"

He shrugged his one shruggable shoulder. "Yes, it's a coincidence, but coincidences do happen. Mine was exactly two weeks before his. August eighth. Also on a Tuesday evening and at about eight o'clock. More coincidence for you there, but that's where coincidence ends. Wait a minute. If I'm going through the whole thing let's have our drinks. I thought whatever you wanted might take only a minute or two when I suggested we get our talking over with first."

He went out into the kitchen and came back with two highballs, on a tray so he could carry them with one hand. He didn't bother to close the door—he'd have had to make a trip back to do it—but Mrs. Schwarz didn't come in to join us. There'd been a sentence or two of low-voiced conversation and he'd probably asked her to stay there until we were through talking. And she was either being docile or preferred to drink alone rather than in our company.

When he'd sat down again, this time with a glass in his hand, he said, "Okay, here's how it happened. I'd gone out to buy some liquor—same liquor store I just went to; it's a few blocks from here—and was coming back with

the package.

"I started across Crancroft—that's the street half a block north of here, the one the bus line's on. I wasn't jaywalking—like Rogers was—I was crossing at the corner and in a marked pedestrian lane. I'd looked both ways and nothing was coming, along Crancroft, that is. There was a car coming along the other street, Rosemont, but it was coming too fast to be intending to make a turn. So I saw it but stepped out to cross anyway.

"Only it did make a turn, right in front of me, and of course at that speed it not only went wide but skidded. I remember the screech of the rubber. I tried to get back—I was about six feet from the curb—but it happened too fast and I couldn't make it. The car didn't hit me squarely, Or I wouldn't be here now, but it sideswiped me, knocked me clear back on the sidewalk. And out cold; I woke up in the hospital, hours later.

"So what happened after that I know only from the cops who chased the car, and caught it. A police car happened to be coming along Crancroft a block or so away and saw the whole thing happen—the car kept going and they took out after it—meanwhile radioing in for a police ambulance to come to Crancroft and Rosemont to pick me up. If they'd stopped even to see if I was alive or dead they couldn't have me any good anyway and they'd have lost the car. He'd have got away with it as a hit-run. But they caught up with him a few blocks later and pinched him."

"Who was he?" I asked. "And what happened to him?"

"He was a salesman in an appliance store. His name, if it matters, is Charles Bracken. What happened to him is that threw the book at him; he's still in jail and has some months to spend there yet. They had him cold on drunken driving—he was plenty drunk. And reckless driving, leaving the scene of an accident involving personal injury, some others. And he had a previous conviction on drunken driving, although that one hadn't involved an accident.

"I don't know what his fines ran up to, but the sentences added up to something over six months. I wasn't in court, so I don't know exactly."

"You didn't have to testify against him?"

"Oh, no. He pleaded guilty on all counts. With two cops having seen what happened, what chance would he have had? They had him so cold that I feel sorry for him—almost."

"How bad were your injuries?"

"Not bad at all outside of the arm and shoulder. That was where I took the impact. Oh, there were bruises and contusions, but nothing serious. And although on landing back up on the sidewalk I must have hit my head hard enough to knock me out, there wasn't any concussion."

I said, "But isn't two months pretty long to have to wear a cast?"

"It is. But the breaks were really bad ones. Several bones in the shoulder, two in the elbow. But it's practically all right now; the cast is going to be taken off sometime next week, thank God. Arm'll still be stiff and a little lame

for a while, but I'm assured there'll be no permanent injury. Will you have another drink, Mr. Hunter?"

I looked and saw that my glass was empty. But I stood up and said, "No thanks, Mr. Schwarz. And thanks for talking to me. I'd better run along."

If Mrs. Schwarz heard me saying good-bye and leaving, she gave no sign, and I was just as glad of that.

I took a bus into downtown Freeland and wondered if there was anything else I could or should do while I was there and decided there wasn't. I could verify the story of his accident that Schwarz had just given me by talking to the police, but I didn't see any point in it. Koslovsky would already have taken care of that and Schwarz's story must be true. And if it was, he was right; there couldn't be any possible connection beyond coincidence between his accident and Rogers'.

So I took a bus back to Chicago. It was after six o'clock by the time I got to Mrs. Brady's and went up to our room. Uncle Am was there. I asked if I'd kept him waiting.

"No, just been back a few minutes. Where have you been, if it's any of my business."

"It was business. I went out to Freeland."

"Sit down and tell me about it, Ed. Who all did you see?"

I took the carbon copy of my report that Starlock had read and that I'd delivered to Koslovsky out of my pocket and handed it to him. I said, "Report on last night. Read it first, for background."

He read it. "Damn good going, Ed, for a first date. Now what's with Freeland? Or would you rather tell me while we eat? Hungry?"

"I guess I am hung—My God, I am hungry. I forgot to eat lunch. Went right to Starlock's when I closed our office, then got a lift to Freeland with him and I've been going ever since."

He grinned. "All right, let's go have some steaks."

We went and had some steaks. But I started my story while we were going to the restaurant, talked while we were waiting for service, managed to talk a little while we ate, and finished over our coffee.

Uncle Am shook his head slowly. "Kid, it looks bad and the more you find out the worse it looks. From the angle of what you're trying to do, I mean."

"What am I trying to do?"

"To find an out for Jason Rogers. For Wanda's sake. Have you fallen for her?"

I said, "I like her a hell of a lot. I wouldn't say I've fallen for her. Yes, I'm trying to dig the truth, but I'll admit I'll be happier if that truth turns out to be something good for her father."

"Yeah. But your Koslovsky sounds like a bright boy. Everything he says makes sense, and he thinks Rogers was guilty. And that part about Rogers' accomplice having taken off with the boodle and Rogers' death being a suicide—Hell, that makes almost too much sense."

“Let’s give it a rest,” I said. “Let’s talk about something else. How’s your own job going?”

“Okay. I’ve got one more day coming. Think I’ll put it in tomorrow and get it over with.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday.”

“Yeah, that’s why. He won’t be working and I can put in one full day tailing him. Haven’t done much of that yet. I won’t have to start till after noon and then I’ll stick with him till he goes to bed and that ought to do it. I’ll take some other day off next week to make up.”

“But how do you know you can pick him up after noon?”

“Got fairly close to his landlady, learned his habits. He sleeps late Sundays, never leaves the place till one o’clock or so. If I’m out there and waiting for him by noon, that’ll be safe. Well, how’d you like to see a movie?”

I said, “I wouldn’t mind. But aren’t you going out to see Leon Cavallo this evening?”

“Sure, but it’s a night club; I shouldn’t get there before eleven, joint opens at nine, but Cavallo probably doesn’t come down to help open it up. A movie first would time things about right. How’d you like to come along with me? To the club, I mean: you’ve already said okay on the movie.”

“I’d like it,” I said. “But would it be smart—with Blackie as the doorman? We’re not exactly buddy-buddy, you know. My guess is he’d enjoy a chance to turn me down as *persona non grata*. If not worse.”

“Let me worry about that.”

So I said okay. “But how about some more intellectual form of entertainment than a movie? We’ve seen several recently. You saw one only night before last—when you did that wonderful tail job on Wanda and she led you into a movie—and up the garden path on the way out.”

He sighed. “Okay, kid. What shall we do?”

“Let’s go bowling. We haven’t bowled for almost a month.”

We went bowling. We bowl about even. Uncle Am has a nice hook and gets more strikes than I do, but he’s wild at picking off odd pins that don’t fall the first time, and I’m deadly at that so I get more spares. We played for a hundred dollars a game—to apply on the current gin rummy cumulative score—but we hadn’t got anywhere after four games; we’d won two apiece.

Uncle Am looked at his watch. “Kid, I’m not tired but my arm is. And it’s well after ten o’clock; let’s head for the Gray Goose. So if we’re there ahead of Leon, what the hell. We can have a drink while we wait.”

We took a cab. Uncle Am told the driver to drop us off on Clark just past Burnham. The Gray Goose is on that corner, but the entrance is on Burnham so I figured we were going in the back way to duck Blackie.

But I was wrong. When Uncle Am had paid off the cab and it had driven away he said, “Ed, here’s what we do. Let me turn the corner a few steps ahead of you, six or ten steps. Just far enough so we won’t seem to be together, see? I’ll go first and you follow me.”

I didn't know what the hell he had in mind—it sounded crazy to me. But he was already starting off, turning the corner. I followed, about ten steps behind.

Blackie was standing outside the open double door. Uncle Am walked past him with a casual salute, and inside. And I followed, still wondering what the hell.

When I started to turn in, the trouble started. Blackie had done a double take at the sight of me, a few steps before I reached him. When I did reach him and turned to go in he stepped squarely in the middle of the doorway and put out a big hand, put it right in the middle of my chest. "Where the hell you think you're going?"

It was a rhetorical question—although he wouldn't have intended it that way because he wouldn't have known what a rhetorical question was. He knew damn well where I was going—or where I intended to go.

I said, "Listen, Blackie, you can't—"

"The hell I can't. I'm hired to keep out undesirables. That's the boss's orders. Unless you want to end up smeared in the gutter, you'd better damn quick—"

But that was as far as he got. Past him I'd been watching Uncle Am. He'd gone inside, but only as far as the bottom of a few steps leading upward and to the closed inside doors. There he'd stopped to light a cigarette, or anyway he'd put one in his mouth and had a match in his hand. He'd turned and was watching our way. He took the two steps that put him behind Blackie, and swung. A perfect rabbit punch, right in the middle of the back of Blackie's neck.

And Blackie went forward against me, and I damn near went down into the gutter just from catching his weight. But then Uncle Am was helping me. "Inside the hallway with him. Put him down gently."

CHAPTER TEN

We put him down gently, his back against the wall of the hallway, and left him there. “What the hell did you take a chance like that for?” I asked. “Damn it, if you know Cavallo we could have gone in the back way or you could have called Cavallo and had him meet us outside, or something.”

“Kid, he had it coming. He knocked you out, didn’t he, in the alley?”

I didn’t have time to answer that because we were through the inner doors, into the night club itself, and we stopped to look around. I didn’t see Wanda at first. It was a big room. There were fifty or sixty tables, in various sizes from small tables for two on up, seating room for at least a couple of hundred people. There were only sixty or seventy customers at the moment, but it was early, too early for the after-theater trade that naturally gravitates toward night clubs when the show is over.

There was a bandstand with a dance floor in front of it. Not a big dance floor, but not a postage stamp sized one either. The band wasn’t there; it was taking a break somewhere at the moment. I mean the brass and reed instruments were there; the piano, traps and bull fiddle are furniture that would have been on the stand even if they hadn’t started yet for the evening. Besides them, there were a trumpet and a trombone and a sax and clarinet apiece racked in front of two chairs for the reed men. A seven-piece band, just about right for a room this size.

Then, as my eyes went past the bandstand, I saw Wanda. She was sitting in the farthest corner, and there was a small table there where she could put down her cigarette tray when she wasn’t circulating with it. She wore a cute little costume in black satin, abbreviated, but not too abbreviated. Her legs were bare but the décolletage at the top was more modest than most evening gowns. She wasn’t looking our way and didn’t see us.

From somewhere on the other side of the room a voice boomed out, “Am! Am Hunter!”

I looked that way and saw a man waving at us—or at Uncle Am—from the far side of a table at which he was sitting alone. Or I’d thought at first that he was sitting; he wasn’t. He’d already slid down from his chair and as he came around the table to meet us halfway I saw that he was a dwarf, a little under four feet tall. He shook hands heartily with Uncle Am and then with me when Uncle Am introduced us. He was, of course, Leon Cavallo.

“Don’t stand here, damn it. Come on to my table.” He was already starting toward it. We sat down. I noticed that he had to get up onto his chair with a

little hop; like all dwarfs he had a relatively long torso but very short legs. His shoulders were broad; sitting down, you wouldn't have taken him for a big man but you'd have thought he was of average height and very stocky. "Well—" He looked around for the nearest waiter to snap his fingers at.

"Wait," Uncle Am told him. "Drinks in a minute, but I want to tell you something first and fast. Your doorman is going to come in here any second now, with blood in his eye. We had a little trouble with him."

"Blackie? How the hell did he give you trouble, Am?"

"He didn't, I gave him trouble. But no tried to keep Ed from coming in. Matter of a personal grudge he's got against—oh-oh, here he comes now."

Blackie had pushed his way through the doors mid was Standing there looking around for us. With, as Uncle Am, had just predicted, blood in his eye. He looked as mean and mad as he was big and strong.

"Blackie!" Cavallo's voice boomed again.

Blackie looked our way and looked startled to see us flanking his boss. But he marched over, and tried to get his side of the story on the record first. "These guys, Mr. Cavallo. One of them put the slug on me from behind."

"While you were trying to keep the other one out. And why were you doing that, Blackie?" The dwarf's voice had dropped in pitch, but it was cold, menacing.

"You told me—" Blackie was on the defensive now, "to use my own judgment on—"

"I told you to keep out drunks and bums. Which, in your judgment, is Ed here? I also told you to keep out people who'd been here before and made trouble. When was Ed ever here before? Did I ever tell you to throw your weight around by barring people you don't happen to like personally?"

"No, Mr. Cavallo. But—" He didn't know where to go with the *but*.

Cavallo slid down off his chair and walked around the table, toward Blackie. He stood there, arms akimbo, looking up at Blackie, the top of his head not much higher than Blackie's belt buckle. But Blackie took a step backward. He looked as though he wanted to turn and go back to his post, but he didn't dare till Cavallo was through with him.

"Blackie, you stupid lout," Cavallo said. "These men are *friends* of mine. Not just customers, *friends*. Any time either or both of them come back, run out the red carpet. If you haven't got a red carpet, go get one. You understand me?"

"All right, Mr. Cavallo." He started to turn.

"Just a minute, that isn't all of it. I'm not just talking about here at the club. I'm talking about anything happening anywhere, any time, to either of these gentlemen. And I'm not threatening to fire you if something does happen. I'm telling you something worse will happen to you than what might happen to them. Something much worse. Now get back out there."

He came back and hopped up onto his chair again. Uncle Am was grinning. "Nice going, Leon, and thanks. Now we're ready for that drink."

Cavallo snapped his fingers and a waiter was right there and took our orders.

Cavallo said, "That Blackie's quite a chunk of muscle to kayo, Am, even from behind. Did you take a chance, or did you sap him?"

Uncle Am grinned. "Didn't sap him, but—" He put his right hand into his coat pocket and pulled it out as a fist. Then he turned the fist over and opened it; inside it was a roll of half dollars. "I figured that extra weight would do it. The old carney trick, remember? When there was a hey-rube we'd try, if there was time, to get a roll of coins in each hand before we mixed in the clem. Not dangerous like a blackjack is, or brass knucks, but it can turn an ordinary punch into a super-duper one."

Cavallo laughed. "I remember. Am, are you still in the private detective racket?"

"Yeah, but not with an agency. Ed and I are partners, have our own office. We're in the book—Hunter and Hunter—if you might ever want to reach us. And that reminds me, we're here partly on business. Couple questions I want to ask you."

"Shoot, Am."

The waiter came with our drinks and Uncle Am waited till he'd gone. Then he said, "The main question is what you know about Blackie. He's popped up in a case we're working on. Not sure he's really involved in it and don't know how he's involved if he is, but we want to know whatever you can tell us about him."

"Not a hell of a lot. I don't think he was born in Chi, but he's been around a long time. Used to be a small-time hood, did some goon bits. I used him myself a time or two—back in the days when we used goons; we've got better methods now. I know he's taken a few falls—but I guess you've looked up his record, such as it is."

Uncle Am nodded.

"Well, I hadn't seen him for a couple of years until about a year ago—let's see, ten months ago—he came to me. Said he was on his uppers and wanted a job, any kind of job. Preferably an honest one; he'd decided to go straight if he could, and still eat. Said he'd even take a job in the kitchen here if I'd give him one.

"I told him I could do a little better than that. The doorman job happened to be open; I gave him a chance at it. And damn it, Am, he's done well. He's been dependable—don't think he's missed an evening. And sober—at least on the job, and I don't think he ever was a heavy drinker. Never got into trouble or made trouble, till tonight. A lot of the customers liked him, mentioned it."

He spread his hands. "That's it, Am. And Ed. Everything I can tell you about him. But I know a few people I can ask some questions, and if I find out anything more I'll give you a ring and tell you. Hunter and Hunter, in the book."

"Right," Uncle Am said.

“Only I want it the other way around too, Am.” Cavallo took a card out of one pocket and a pencil out of the other. He scribbled something on the card and handed it to Uncle Am. “That’s my phone number, unlisted. If your investigation turns up that he’s mixed up in anything bad—murder or dope peddling or anything like that—you’ll call and let me know. Okay?”

“Okay,” Uncle Am said. “It’s a deal, and fair enough. That was question one. Now two. What do you know about your new cigarette girl, Wanda Rogers?”

“Huh?” Cavallo looked surprised. “Almost nothing—this is her first night here. Oh, wait a minute. I see; you’re tying her in with Blackie. Yeah, Blackie brought her around. Last Saturday night, early, when he came to work. I talked to her and hired her.

“Said she had another job, office work I think she said, and had to give a week’s notice but that she’d take the job if I’d hold it open that long. That fitted—the girl who was working then had just given me a week’s notice; she’d decided to go to New York—so I hired her.”

“You didn’t or don’t know who she is?”

“What do you mean, Am? She gave me the name of Wanda Rogers. Is she somebody else?”

“Nope. She’s Wanda Rogers. But you didn’t tie her in with the Freeland business? Jason Rogers, the guy who’s accused of embezzling town funds out there?”

“The hell. No, I hadn’t. I’d read something about the case, but—what is she? His daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if I’d read her name I’d forgotten it. And Rogers is a common enough name. No, I never tied her in with that. Not that it would have mattered if I had. She isn’t accused of anything, is she? And if she is, what would I care? She’s the best-looking cigarette girl I’ve had since I opened here. She could be Jack the Ripper’s daughter and it wouldn’t bother me—as long as she didn’t start out in her father’s footsteps.”

“But it wasn’t mentioned, by her or by Blackie. How’d he come to bring her around?”

“I don’t know. He just did. Brought her with him when he came to work—I happened to be down early so I was here. Introduced her and said he’d heard the cig gal job was going to be open and she’d like to apply for it. I figured he knew her and—well, that’s all I figured. That girl is class, I could see that. I didn’t figure she was shacking up with someone like Blackie. I just figured he knew her and was trying to do her a favor.”

I asked, “You didn’t think she looked too good—too much class, I mean—for the job?”

Cavallo turned and looked at me. “Well—yes, Ed. In one way I did. To the extent of warning her about something. I told her we kept a clean joint here and she wouldn’t get in any trouble. But that men will be men, after a few

drinks, and she couldn't count on not getting patted on the fanny once in a while, or pinched. That we'd see it didn't go any further than that; if anybody got really fresh we'd unfreshen him. And that she'd probably get propositioned once in a while—but that all she had to do was say no.

"Yeah, I told her that. She said she wasn't a prude, and that if nothing worse than that happened she could take care of it herself. Ed, was that question business or personal? I mean, do you know her?"

"Yes, I know her."

"Well, don't worry about her. We have ten waiters, average, and a husky doorman in reserve. She won't get in any trouble."

He laughed. "We've had more trouble with cigarette girls the other way around. I've had to fire four or five of them for inviting propositions, for making after-dates for a toss in the hay to augment their incomes. Not that I'm a prude either; I don't give a damn about their morals off-duty, as long as they don't make the deals here. But I keep the Gray Goose respectable; I don't want word to get around that it's an anteroom to a whorehouse. That's one reason I use waiters instead of waitresses. With a whole flock of waitresses, you just can't keep some of that from happening. You can't keep tabs on all of 'em, and there are always some of 'em willing to peddle it. Especially to customers in a good club like this—men they know got enough money to pay good prices.

"That's why I picked Wanda, why I try to pick girls with class whenever I can. No, Ed, you don't need to worry about your girl—if she is your girl. She'll be as safe here as she wants to be. Now we better change the subject; she's coming this way."

I turned to look, and Wanda was coming, only a few steps away. I'm afraid my first glance was at her legs, but they were worth glancing at. Not only were they perfectly shaped but the skin seemed to have the same soft, creamy texture I'd noticed in her shoulders and arms when she'd worn the evening gown last night. Maybe even creamier; the short black ruffled skirt above them was a perfect counterpoint. They were more than worth glancing at; they were worth staring at. But a glance was all I had time for. Without embarrassing her by staring. I had to lift my eyes to her face before she reached us. She was smiling at us. "Ed," she said, "Am. Mr. Cavallo. Cigarettes, gentlemen?"

Uncle Am and I had stood up. Cavallo hadn't—whether because he was the proprietor of the place or because, being a dwarf, standing up didn't make him even as tall as he was sitting down, I don't know.

He said, "Sit down, Wanda. We've been talking about you. Very nice things only, by the way." He snapped his fingers and a waiter started toward us.

She hesitated. "Am I supposed to sit at tables with customers, Mr. Cavallo? Your maître d'hôtel told me—"

"My maître d'hôtel, Wanda. The *my* is the key word. When the boss asks

you to, you may. Also to have a drink. Highball?" The waiter was hovering and Cavallo gave him the order, new drinks for all of us. Meanwhile I held Wanda's chair while she sat down, between Uncle Am and me and across from Cavallo. She pulled the strap of her tray over her head and put it down on the table.

Cavallo asked her, "Doing all right?"

"I guess so. Not many sales yet, but it's early. Mr. Cavallo, I should have asked a few more questions before I started; I can now. If a man takes a pack of cigarettes and puts a dollar bill on my tray am I supposed to assume that the difference is a tip? I know it usually is, in night clubs, but—"

Cavallo shook his head. "It usually is, yes. A dollar is about par for pack plus tip. Sometimes you'll hit a big spender who'll give you a fin for one or two packs, even a ten-spot if he's drunk or is showing off to the party he's with. But always offer change. Nine times out of ten he'll wave it off from a single, but that gives him the satisfaction of feeling that he's tipping, gives him the satisfaction of feeling generous and a big-shot."

Uncle Am grinned. "Doctor Cavallo on psychology. Listen and learn, Wanda."

Cavallo said, "You think psychology doesn't count in running a night club—or handling any of its jobs? Hell, Am, it counts as much as with a carney—only with the carney we knew the suckers' psychology so well we didn't have to think about it.

"But let me finish. Wanda, if you just say thanks and walk off without offering change, you won't be called back one time in a hundred—and that hundredth customer isn't going to be a very desirable customer anyway. But the other ninety-nine, the ones who'll wave off the change anyway, will feel that they're being charged a dollar for the cigarettes, and will feel gypped, besides being denied the satisfaction of making a generous gesture."

"Thanks, Mr. Cavallo. I see you're right."

Our drinks came. "To you, Wanda," Cavallo said. And then after we'd each taken a sip to that toast, "And otherwise, how go things? Any propositions? Ed, here, was worrying. And have you had your fanny patted yet?"

"No propositions. And no pats yet either—but the evening's young."

Cavallo grinned. "If you'll stand up a moment, I'm sure that Ed Hunter, here, will be glad to perform the initiation."

She laughed. "Thanks for warning me. I'll get up, when I do, on the other side of my chair."

The orchestra must have come back; they were starting to play "Stardust," and a good job of it. Not great, but good, as good as you'd expect in any night club short of a big top one, like Chez Paree.

And we talked a little while, with the conversation breaking up into tête-à-têtes, Cavallo and Uncle Am talking about carnivals and midways, and Wanda and I about music and musicians. There were other things I wanted to talk to her about, but not here and now.

Then she finished her drink and excused herself.

I watched her walk away, and her legs were as nice from the back as they were from the front.

I listened to the music for a while, not paying much attention to the conversation, until I realized Cavallo had asked me a question. "How do you like it, Ed?"

"Like what?"

"The band."

"Nice," I said. "Smooth. It's as far from Stan Kenton as it is from Lawrence Welk, right in the middle. Which is no criticism; it's just what you need for a place like this."

Gavallo nodded. "The kid knows music, Am. He's exactly right."

Uncle Am said, "Sure he knows music. Plays trombone himself. Maybe your band would let him sit in for a number."

I said, "Goddamn it, Uncle Am, cut it out. You know I'm an amateur, not a pro. I'm not good enough to—"

But Cavallo had already snapped his fingers and a waiter was coming. He told the waiter to ask Jack to come to our table a moment as soon as they'd finished the number they were playing. The waiter went toward the bandstand. I was stuck with it and decided not to argue. I could get along all right as long as they let me stay in the background and not stake any solos or show off. And as long as they picked a number I knew, which of course they would. So, hell, I'd go through with it now that Uncle Am had put me on the spot. But I'd bawl the hell out of him later when we were alone.

The Jack who came to our table a minute or so later was the tall blond piano player. I'd already guessed he was the leader because I'd noticed that it was he who gave the rest of the boys the beat and they followed him and took their cues from him. Cavallo introduced us and asked the question.

"Sure," Jack said. "Willie'll be glad to sit out a number and take a rest."

"Sure he won't mind lending his tram?"

"Hell, no, he's done it often enough before. We often get somebody here who wants to sit in a while. What do you want to blow?"

"Almost any standard. Let me warn you; I got roped into this and I'm not a pro. But I won't mess you up if you let me stay background and fill in; don't put the finger on me for any rides."

"Okay. Shall we give 'Dinah' a whirl? That's as standard as you can get and we haven't played it yet tonight."

"'Dinah's' fine," I said. I had a recording of "Dinah" and had played along with it often. "Let's go, and get it over with."

We started for the bandstand but about halfway there I had a sudden thought, put a hand on Jack's arm and stopped him. "Listen, do you by any chance know *Vesti la Giubba*, the 'Laugh, Clown, Laugh' bit from *Pagliacci*?"

He grinned. "Sure, the boss's favorite. He requests it every once in a while.

We've even worked out an arrangement."

"Wonder if you'd take a chance on something, tell the boys to skip the arrangement and play straight, let me solo the melody."

"Sure, easy." And a minute later I was limbering up a trombone and blowing a soft note or two for size while Jack passed the word among the boys. I wasn't worried about fluffing any notes; I knew the melody perfectly. I even knew the words of the aria—not the original Italian ones but the English translation that was popular for a while. The only thing that worried me was whether my lip was right and whether I could get a good tone, a big tone. So much of my playing, because it was in a rooming house, had been as soft as I could make it.

Then Jack was back at his piano and we were ready. I'd taken the chair Willie the trombonist had vacated when he'd handed me the tram, but Jack motioned me to stand up and step forward, and I did. Then he started the intro and the other instruments came in softly and when came the point where the aria itself starts I began to play.

And knew from the very first phrase that I was doing all right. Maybe so much pianissimo playing had strengthened my lip instead of weakening it. Anyway the tone was big and round and mellow, the kind of tone Tommy Dorsey used to get when he was at his best.

I saw that people—some of them, not all—were stopping their talking and turning around to look and listen. I saw Wanda standing stock still right in the middle of the loom, staring at me.

Don't give me the credit, except for playing it well and simply and getting a good tone. Leoncavallo, the original Leoncavallo, wrote it and it's one of the most beautiful and poignant of all arias.

When we finished, there was applause. Not an ovation, but a little more than the spattering of applause that the usual band numbers got. No ovation, except in one quarter. Leon Cavallo was standing up to applaud, and he was six feet tall because he was standing on his chair. And he cupped his hands around his lips and boomed out, "Encore! Play it again!"

I looked at Jack and he was grinning; he nodded and said, "Boss's orders. Here we go." And started the intro again. I didn't play it any better the second time, but I didn't play it any worse either.

But after that I made my escape. Jack wanted me to keep on a while, said I could either sit in a while or go on carrying melody solo. But I said I was going to quit while I was ahead, and thanked him for backing me so well.

When I got back to our table Cavallo glared at me. "You son of a bitch. Your uncle told you I used to be a clown and you took advantage of me. Just for some free champagne—which is now coming."

Uncle Am said, "No, Leon. I just told him I'd known you with the carney, not what you did with it. But he did ask me if Leon Cavallo was your real name, and I told him the truth on that. So he had that much basis to guess on."

I said, "And '*Vesti la Giubba*' is the best aria of Leoncavallo's, so I

guessed you'd like it."

Cavallo nodded. "I was a clown for seven years, Ed. Part of the time with a midget troupe—they often have a dwarf clown as a foil for the midgets. And part of the time roaming the midway as a free act."

The champagne came, a magnum of it. And a little while later Wanda came back to our table. "That was wonderful, Ed. You really do play." I grinned and told her I'd just been lucky, and Cavallo made her sit down with us long enough to have a glass of bubbly.

But she turned down Cavallo's offer of a refill. "No thanks; I'd better get back on the job. But Mr. Cavallo, may I speak to Ed privately for a minute first? We can talk over in that corner where my little table is."

"Sure. We don't encourage customers visiting there, but Ed isn't a customer. Or—I've got a private office. If you kids would rather use that—"

But she no-thanked him on that offer and we excused ourselves. She went first, weaving her way between the tables, and I followed. A few paces behind because the view was better from that distance. Once she was beckoned to a table and I waited while she stopped and made a sale.

In the corner she put her tray down on the little table and turned to face me. "Ed, I know we have a date for tomorrow afternoon, but I'm too curious about something to wait that long. And I didn't want to ask in front of Mr. Cavallo. What happened about Blackie? I saw him come in and—well, I saw what happened, but I couldn't hear anything, of course."

I said, "Everything's okay about Blackie. But it would take a little time to tell you the whole story and—I've got a better idea. There are some other things I'd like to tell you, and without waiting till tomorrow. I was out at Freeland this afternoon, and—well, do you think you'll be too tired when you're off work for us to talk half an hour or so then?"

"N-no, I guess not. But where could we go, at that hour? Everything will be closed."

"We could talk in one of our rooms; that would be the best bet. But not mine, on account of Blackie's being next to it. He'll be coming home too, and I wouldn't want him to hear your voice in my room. I don't think he'd make any trouble, now, but—there's your reputation to consider."

"Are you going to stay till the club closes?"

"I doubt it. If for no other reason than that I'd be drunk by then, with Cavallo throwing free champagne at us."

"All right, I'll tap on the door of your room when I come in and then we can go up to mine."

I shook my head. "Blackie again. He might get home at the same time as you, or even before. Why not give me the key to your room, and I can wait there for you."

"All right, but it's in my purse back in the dressing room. I'll bring it to you. In a little while; I've been out of circulation and I'd better walk my beat once first before I go back for it. And since we'll be talking later anyway, let

me get started.”

I went back to our table. Uncle Am was there alone. “Anything important?” he asked me.

“Wanted to know about the episode with Blackie and didn’t want to ask in front of Cavallo. Where is he, by the way?”

“Went to his office, had some business to do. Said he’d be busy maybe an hour and hoped we’d wait. I said we might decide to or might not, and made our excuses in case we didn’t. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” I said. “I don’t think I want to stay that long, but I can stand one more drink. Maybe we can pay for one for a change.”

“Nope, I heard Leon tell our waiter no check. Anyway—” He reached down into the ice bucket and held up the bottle of champagne to look at it, “there’s enough of this left for another glass apiece and there’s no use letting it go to waste. It’ll be flat by the time Leon gets back.”

He poured us a drink apiece and it killed the bottle. While we sipped it I told him about my after-date with Wanda and that we, or at least I, had to wait around in any case till she brought me the key.

He raised his eyebrows a little but didn’t say anything. Except, “Then you’re going to have time to kill, kid. Want to come with me?”

“Where? Aren’t you going home from here?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Uncle Am took the roll of half dollars from his pocket, tossed and caught it, and then put it back. He said, "This thing's too heavy to carry around; it's making me lopsided. And I know where there's a fifty-cent slot machine. I aim to get rid of these halves in it first—or else hit a jackpot and cash it all in for bills—and then play a little poker for a while. Or shoot a crap or two if there's no seat open in a poker game. Unless you'll come with me, that is. If you do you can wrestle with the one-arm bandit and I can get in a game right away."

"Where is the place?"

"Hank Cheyney's place. You were there with me once, about a year ago."

"Yeah," I said. "I remember you dropped almost two hundred."

"Thanks for reminding me. But I won't lose, anything like that tonight. It's a no-credit, no-check game. And thirty bucks is all I've got with me, so I can't be hurt bad."

"Thirty counting the ten that coin roll is worth, or besides?"

"Besides. But that's earmarked for the slot machine. It's lucky money—or it was a little while ago. To play it in a game I'd have to change it for chips and that would take the luck off it."

I laughed and said okay, I'd go. The main thing that decided me was that it was in the general direction of Covent Place. Fairly near it, in fact; I'd be able to walk the rest of the way.

A few minutes later Wanda came. Since I'd told Uncle Am the score I was glad she handed me the key openly; if she'd tried to slip it to me without his seeing, it would have looked to him as though she considered our appointment a clandestine one. I managed to spend a little money by trading two bucks for two packs of cigarettes. She didn't want to rake the tip part of the money from me, but I assured her it was on the expense account and not out of my pocket. When she left she said, "I'll take a cab, Ed, and get there as soon as I can." And I told her that would be wonderful.

We finished our drinks and left. Uncle Am managed to spend a couple of bucks too, by leaving that much as a tip for the waiter.

Blackie didn't fall all over us outside, but he was correct and polite. He whistled up a cab for us when we told him we wanted one; he opened and closed the cab door for us and said "Good night, gentlemen," in a carefully neutral voice.

Cheyney's gambling joint is one big room back of a small tavern that's

mostly a front for the operation. The bartender gave Uncle Am the nod, which meant we could go straight on through. If there's anyone in the tavern whom he doesn't know and who he thinks might be a cop, he doesn't nod, and in that case you stop at the bar and have a drink. Then, if the suspect one is still there when you've finished, you can go out and around, and in at an alley entrance; the doorman will be there, in that case. But to avoid a noticeable amount of traffic in the alley, the door there isn't used when the tavern route is safe, which is most of the time.

So we went on back and of course the doorman as well as the bartender knew Uncle Am and let us in. The place wasn't crowded, but it was doing good business. There were eight or nine people at the crap table, and there was a table of blackjack and two poker games. One of the poker games was full, but there were only five men in the other game, so Uncle Am handed me the roll of half dollars, said, "Have fun, kid," and headed for the unfilled poker table.

I went over to the bank of four slot machines against one wall and picked the fifty-cent one; there were two dime ones and a quarter machine too. None of them was in use at the moment. They weren't an important part of the operation; they were there for people who had odd change they wanted to get rid of or thought they could build into a stake.

I broke open the roll of halves and started feeding them in. The machine, I soon found, was generously set. I don't mean it was set to let me win, but I got back about four coins for every five I put in, which meant I had to pull the damn lever five times to get rid of one coin. I pulled the lever about fifty times and was half-way through my twenty halves and getting bored when all of a sudden there it was, three bars for the jackpot.

I took my loot, plus what was left of my original stake, over to the cashier and let him count it and give me folding money for it. There were eighty halves exactly and I got forty dollars for them.

Uncle Am saw me coming toward him and told the other players to deal him out for a hand or two and came to meet me. And we had the same argument we always have whenever he stakes me at something and I win. First he wanted me to keep the forty bucks. Then he admitted ten of it was his and he'd take that back if I'd keep the thirty I'd won. And finally we settled it the way we usually do; he took his ten back plus half of the winnings, and I kept fifteen.

"There's another seat open in the game here," he said. "Why not sit in a while? If you invest only your winnings, what have you got to lose?"

"Fifteen bucks," I said. "No, thanks, Uncle Am. I think I'll run along. You still planning to put in tomorrow afternoon and evening on that tail job?"

"Yep."

"Then I won't even try to connect with you. I'll see you at the office Monday morning. So long."

I walked home. I could have killed some time in my room; it was going to

be at least another hour and a half before Wanda could get here. But there didn't seem to be any point in splitting up my waiting between two places. I went into my own room only long enough to leave my hat and pick up something to read, and then I went up to Wanda's.

The book turned out to be a good one and the time went quickly. It was just an hour and a half before Wanda came home, but it didn't seem that long. I stood, of course, when she came in. She said, "Hi, Ed. Sit down again." She took off her coat and tossed it on the bed, then sat down there herself. I was a little surprised to see that she was wearing an evening dress—the same pink and white striped one she'd worn Friday evening when we'd started with dinner at Ireland's. And we were sitting in the same relative positions in which we'd sat on Thursday night when she'd been in my room. But with one big difference; that night she'd aimed a gun at me and tonight it was a smile.

She said, "You're wondering about the dress, Ed. It's simple. I hadn't thought to ask whether the club provided a costume, and some cigarette girls do wear evening gowns. So I wore this to work in case. After this I'll be wearing street clothes to and from."

"Anything's simple when it's explained. Anyway, you look beautiful in that dress—I guess I told you that Friday evening. How did the job go?"

"Fine. Ed, I made almost as much money tonight as in a whole week at Starlock's. Of course this was Saturday and other nights won't run anywhere near that much. But even so, it shouldn't be more than a couple of weeks, maybe three, before I can start looking for an apartment. And a spinnet. Now that I've heard you play I'm really looking forward, Ed, to our playing together. Now tell me what happened about Blackie at the club tonight."

"Let me ask one question first. Did he bring you home tonight or share a cab with you?"

She shook her head. "No, I found out that he has to work half an hour or so later than I do. He has to help put the chairs up on the tables, some things like that. I'm just as glad. All right, that was your one question. Now tell me about tonight."

I told her what had happened, including the several things Cavallo had told Blackie in telling him off.

She shook her head slowly. "Wasn't that taking an awful chance, Ed?"

I grinned. "I didn't take it—I didn't even know what Uncle Am planned. But I think the two of us could have handled Blackie, even if the sneak punch hadn't been a kayo. It would at least have staggered him. And I guess Uncle Am likes to take chances once in a while. He's a born gambler—and too old for me to try to reform him."

"You don't impress me as an overcautious person yourself, Ed. You said you were out at Freeland this afternoon?"

"Yes. But, Wanda, I'm beginning to wonder if we shouldn't skip that till tomorrow afternoon—or this afternoon—because once we start it'll take a while. And you don't look tired, but you probably are. I know I'm not too

fresh myself.”

“Whatever you say, Ed. I am a little tired, so maybe that would be best.”

I got up, started toward the door, but turned before opening it, and Wanda came into my arms. It started just like the one other goodnight kiss I’d given her—but it didn’t end that way at all; it did explode this time. It turned out not to be a goodnight kiss at all, and neither of us turned out to be even a little bit tired, not for quite a while anyway.

I woke up at ten o’clock and wondered whether I should dress and go down to my own room. I decided not to. Wanda was still sleeping and I might waken her. Besides, if anyone happened to see me leaving her room the later in the day it would be the less suspicious it would look. Besides, I was too content and comfortable where I was. I went back to sleep.

I was awakened by the sound of a door closing and opened my eyes. It was Wanda, in housecoat and slippers, coming back from the bathroom. I said, “My God, you’re beautiful even in the morning. Maybe a little more so; I like your hair a little tousled like that. Come here.”

She came and sat on the bed and I pulled her down and kissed her. A nice long kiss and I thought for a moment that it was going to lead somewhere. In fact it did lead my hand to the zipper of her housecoat, but before I could get it open more than an inch or so, she pulled back and stood up. “Not now, Ed. Wasn’t last night enough for a while?”

“Last night was enough for last night,” I said. “And a very wonderful enough it was. But all right, I’ll behave myself for now. And incidentally when is now?”

I looked at my wrist watch and sat up quickly. I said, “Good Lord, Wanda, we’re going to be late.”

“Late for what?” She looked puzzled. “You didn’t tell me you’d made any special plans.”

“I didn’t. I mean we’ll be late for our one o’clock date with one another. It’s five minutes of one now. Can we be dressed and ready in five minutes?”

She laughed. “I’d rather have half an hour. Could we possibly postpone our date till half past one?”

I was already out of bed and starting to dress. I said, “All right. I’ll go to my room now. You come down at one-thirty—but don’t knock on my door. If Blackie’s in his room he’d hear that and hear us leaving together. I think Blackie is a tame dog now, but just the same the less he knows, the better. About when and how often we see one another. So go on outside and I’ll join you there. Or maybe be outside already, waiting for you.”

“All right, Ed.”

I finished dressing quickly. Since it would be the last chance I’d have at least for the afternoon I kissed Wanda again, and then left. After, of course, listening at the door to make sure no one was in the hallway.

I didn’t go straight to my room, because of Blackie again. If he heard footsteps come down the stairs and then enter my room, he’d know it was I

and where I'd been. That would be even worse than his hearing Wanda stop for me on her way out.

So I went out the front door and stood there a few minutes. It was a bright, sunny day, and quite warm for October. There was a light breeze from off the lake and the air smelled good.

Then I went inside and into my room. I undressed part way—I wanted to change socks and shirt anyway—and washed and shaved at the washstand, then dressed again. I left and locked my room and went down the hall to the bathroom. Not for misdirection, but because I had to go. Then I went outside to wait for Wanda and she came out a few minutes later. We started walking west toward State Street.

"First on the agenda," I said, "is food. Do you want breakfast or lunch?"

"Well—breakfast, but a big one. Ham and eggs and fried potatoes and stuff."

"I know the place," I told her. We caught a cab on State Street and I took her to a restaurant in the Loop that serves breakfasts twenty-four hours a day, and big ones if you order them that way. We ordered them that way, and did justice to them.

It was Wanda who, over our coffee, first brought the meeting to order. "Whom did you see in Freeland, Ed?"

I said, "Koslovsky, Mrs. Agnew, Schwarz. In that order, but I won't talk about them in that order; I want to save Koslovsky for last. From Mrs. Agnew I learned only two things you hadn't already told me. One of them you probably don't know about. It hasn't anything to do with the case, not possibly, but I may as well tell you. Her husband died recently in the asylum."

She looked stricken. "Oh, Ed, how horrible. That it should have happened too late, I mean. She and Dad would probably have married, and I think she'd have made him happy."

"How well did you know her, Wanda?"

"Not too well, I'm afraid, and we didn't see one another often. We liked one another well enough—or at least I liked her and think she liked me. But there was so much difference in our ages, and we just didn't have much in common—except Dad.

"I've seen her only once since the funeral, and that was over a month ago. After the embezzlements had come to light and Dad was first being suspected of being responsible for them, and before I left Freeland. She called on me to ask if there was any way she could help. But there wasn't, of course."

I said, "And the other thing she told me I hadn't known was about Wilbur Schwarz's accident, just two weeks before your father's. You must have known about that."

"Of course. Dad told me about it, and it was in the Freeland papers, the whole story. But I never thought to mention it to you because—Well, what could it possibly have to do with the money? Or Dad's death? Do you want me to tell you what I remember about it?"

“You needn’t. I saw Schwarz and he told me the whole story, and in more detail than you’d remember it. And I’ll admit I don’t see any possible holes in it. I hate coincidences, but maybe I’ll have to swallow this one. Apparently Koslovsky has. How well did you know Schwarz personally?”

“Not at all, really. I was introduced to him once shortly after he started working for Dad. I was downtown shopping one day and ran short of money. I stopped in Dad’s office to get some from him; Schwarz was there and Dad introduced us. That’s the only time I ever saw him.”

“Did you know he lived only a few blocks from you?”

“Yes. Sometime last July Dad mentioned that the Schwarzes had rented a house near us. I asked him if he’d like to have them over for dinner some evening, but he said no. He said Schwarz himself was all right but we couldn’t invite him alone. And that he’d met Schwarz’s wife and didn’t think she was a woman we’d care to know.”

I said, “A masterly understatement. She’s a dipso to begin with. And morally—well, my guess is that poor Wilbur doesn’t have just horns; he’s got antlers like a bull moose.

“Well, we’ve got Koslovsky to cover, but we don’t want to sit here that long. What would you say to a drink? I know it’s right after breakfast, but it’s also nearly three o’clock in the afternoon. If you liked it the other time, I’ll suggest Tom, Dick, and Harry’s.”

“All right. But let’s walk there; it’s such a nice day. I let you take a cab in to the Loop only because I was so darned hungry.”

So we walked. On the way she told me we shouldn’t stay more than an hour or so; she wanted to get back to her room by five.

“Why so early?” I asked her. “Are you planning to sleep some more?”

“No, I’ll get by with what sleep I had. But I’ve got things to do, women things. Washing out some stockings and lingerie, a little sewing. But mostly washing my hair. And I’ll have to do that first, no later than five, to give it time to dry before I go to the club.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll give you an evening off. But—we might as well settle this now—when will I see you again? Tomorrow afternoon?”

“Let’s make it tomorrow evening. I guess I didn’t get around to telling you this but I found what my night off is, and it’s Monday. So if you want to take me to dinner again—”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll pick you up the same time as I did Friday evening, half past six.”

I waited till we had a booth and drinks in front of us at the tavern, and then I opened the meeting again. By doing a lot of talking myself first. I told her about my interview with Koslovsky, and everything he had told me. I didn’t pull any punches; I wanted to shock her. I told her Koslovsky’s Current theory that her father had been guilty and had committed suicide because his outside partner had double-crossed him. Nor did I pull any punches in telling her that Koslovsky definitely disbelieved the story she, Wanda, had told about the

letter her father had left for her. And told her the various and good reasons he had for not believing her.

“Ed, do you—agree with him?” she asked when I stopped talking.

I decided to gamble and tell the truth. It might make her angry at me, but I had to take that chance. I said, “About the suicide hypothesis—I don’t know. But about the letter, I’m afraid I do, Wanda. Your story just doesn’t hold up. Why did you lie?”

She wasn’t angry. For a moment I thought she was going to cry, but she got control of herself. Her face was a little pale and her eyes were troubled, but they met mine. “Ed, I had to lie. Either that or refuse to answer and that would have been worse. The letter didn’t concern embezzlement—or any other crime—but it was something personal, private. And in it Dad specifically asked me not to tell anybody—except one certain other person.”

I said, “Wanda, consider it this way. Let’s assume your father was innocent. Then when he wrote that letter to you three months before his death he didn’t know anything about the embezzlement. And he couldn’t possibly have foreseen the spot that your keeping silent or having to lie about that letter’s contents would put you in, that it would throw suspicion on you—and, indirectly, additional suspicion on him. I’m sure that under the circumstances he wouldn’t want you to keep it secret. Unless, of course, it concerned something even worse than embezzlement, and you say it had nothing to do with any crime.”

“I—never thought of it that way, Ed. Maybe you’re right. I know if I tell you you’ll have to tell Mr. Koslovsky—but it really wouldn’t matter if a few people know. As long as it doesn’t become general knowledge or get in the newspapers.”

“Koslovsky isn’t going to do anything to hurt you, Wanda. Unless he has to to solve his case.”

“It isn’t I who could be hurt, Ed, or I’d have told the truth right away. It’s Mrs. Agnew. But I suppose not too badly, especially now that she’s really a widow, even if the truth does get out. Here’s all it is, Ed. Dad told me, in the letter, that he wanted to leave a bequest of a thousand dollars to Mrs. Agnew. He said that his estate, even if he died soon, should run enough times that so I wouldn’t mind or be hurt, and that he’d like her to have that much of it.

“He said he didn’t want to make a new will or add a codicil to the old one because then when the will was probated, the bequest would become a matter of public knowledge, and might hurt Mrs. Agnew’s reputation. And you can see he was right, Ed—at least as far as some people are concerned. You know the conclusion they’d draw from a man’s making a bequest to a woman who presumably had been only a casual friend. So he asked me to take care of it privately by giving her a thousand out of the estate. And that’s all.”

“My God, Wanda, don’t you see how important that letter would be, if you can produce it? You did destroy it?”

“Yes, after my father was accused, I knew the police would come out to

search the house and I didn't want them to find it; it would have become public knowledge in that case, too. Destroying it was the only way I could keep it secret, and Dad had asked me to."

"Damn," I said. "And did you get around to telling Mrs. Agnew about it? Can she corroborate your story to that extent?"

"No, Ed. I intended to tell her, of course, but there didn't seem to be any hurry, and I had so many things to do. And then by the time she came to see me, I didn't tell her another reason. The estate had been blocked and it looked—it still looks—as though it's going to be confiscated as partial restitution. If that happens there won't be thousand dollars for her. So why raise her hopes, till I know? And then have to disappoint her. Ed, why do you seem to think that letter is so important?"

"Because, you silly little fool, it would practically prove your father's innocence. It was written five months after the embezzlements had started. The embezzler knew he had only a few more months to go, that he had to lam before next regular audit. And that, when he lammed, any tangible assets he left behind him would be seized immediately."

"But if he wrote it just on the off chance that he might die sooner than—"

"He did die sooner than, and it happened anyway. His death would just move up the date of the audit, as it did. I? And your father would have known that. If he was guilty, there was utterly no possible reason for him to have written that letter and made that bequest. Not even as a misdirection, since it wasn't going to be opened until he either died or disappeared."

She sighed. "You're right, I was stupid. I should have kept that letter and turned it over. But all I thought of was Dad's request that I keep the bequest a secret. What can I do now?"

"Talk to Koslovsky. Right now if he's home and can see you. It's more important than washing your hair."

"But he's your client. Aren't you going to report to him?"

"Of course. But we want him to have it firsthand as well as second. So he'll have a chance to question you on details, and be convinced, if you can convince him. If you can make him believe you, it's going to change his whole thinking on the case. Phone him from that booth over there right away, tell him it's something important and that you'll come out to talk to him if he can see you. I don't think he'll say no to that but if he does make an appointment to see him at his office tomorrow. Afternoon, so you'll have time to sleep. Just remember one thing in talking to him. He doesn't know that you know I'm a detective so don't give me away on that point. Just tell him you confided in a friend and the friend talked you into going to him. That won't be a lie, anyway, just an omission. Tell him the truth about everything else."

"Even if he asks me who the friend is?"

"Of course. But he won't ask that—he'll know it already. Do you have change to make the call?"

"Yes, Ed." She went to the booth and while she was gone I ordered us two

more drinks. We'd have to drink them fairly quickly or abandon them if she made a right-away appointment, but that would be all right.

She shook her head when she came back. "No answer."

I said, "If he's out now, he's out for the afternoon, and an evening appointment would make you late for work. So all right, skip it for today. Phone him late tomorrow morning or early afternoon, as soon as you're up and dressed."

"All right, Ed. I've been wanting to go out to Freeland sometime soon anyway to pick up a few more things from the house. Especially a heavier coat I'll be needing soon, even if it's Indian summer today."

"Speaking of the house, Wanda," I said. "You told me, the night we met, that it had been burglarized. There have been so many other things that I've never asked you about that. Will you tell me about it?"

"There isn't much to tell, Ed. It was a daylight burglary—the day after the police came with a warrant and did their searching. I was gone all day that day—the first time I was out of the house that long since Dad's death. I'd realized that I had to find a job and was starting to look for one, and when I came home I found the place had been ransacked. Really ransacked; the burglar or burglars had made as thorough a search as the police had—but the police had put things back where they'd found them, and the burglar hadn't bothered. It took me all evening, after I'd called the police and they'd come and gone, to put things back and straighten up. The way he got in was obvious; a window at the back of the house had been pried open. Jimmied is the word, I think."

"Was anything taken?"

"A few pieces of jewelry. Nothing very valuable because I've never gone in for jewelry much, and neither did Dad. About thirty-five dollars in household money that I had in a drawer and hadn't taken with me. That's all. Just the few things he found valuable enough to bother with and Small enough to carry off in his pockets."

"And what did the police think?"

"That it was a professional job by some burglar who'd heard about the embezzlements and got the idea that forty-six thousand dollars—no, not that much; they hadn't got the total as high as that by then—might be hidden in the house and that he'd like a chance to look for it. He didn't find it, of course—if it had been there the police search would have found it before him. But he wouldn't have known that the police had been ahead of him; that hadn't in the papers. So he took what he found anyway. And the jewelry might have brought him about two hundred dollars, so with the money he got enough to pay him for a 's work."

I said, "I'd swallow that much more easily if it hadn't been for the robbery of your room at Mrs. Czerny's, while were out with Blackie. But you say the technique there quite different."

"Yes, very different. It wasn't a robbery at all, really, because nothing was taken. Of course there wasn't anything there to take. I had my money with me,

such as it was, and the only jewelry was costume stuff, not worth stealing. So I that's understandable. But yes, the technique was quite different. Things weren't thrown around at all; they were very carefully put back as nearly as possible the way they'd been. But I've got a good visual memory; there were enough slight differences in the position of things to make me sure someone had been there."

"The door?"

"I'd locked it when I left and it was locked when I came back. It must have been opened with either a picklock or a skeleton key but relocked the same way."

"One other thing you told me—that you'd been followed. Before, that is, the time you really were followed by Uncle Am, and caught him at it. Tell me about that."

"Ed, I could have been wrong about that. I'm not sure. I was nervous, worried for a while. You've helped that a lot, incidentally. There was a time or two when I had a feeling I was being followed, but it could easily have been my imagination. I think now that it probably was. But that feeling, along with the burglaries, which were real, made me suspicious and alert. That's why I caught your uncle at it. And why I spotted you, that first night, as either a detective or a crook and wanted to find out which."

"And showed a lot of courage in the way you went about finding out," I said. "Only one more question, Wanda, and then let's talk about other things, what time we have left. I told you Koslovsky still thinks you might be able to give him a lead to Morrison. Can you?"

"No, I told him the truth about that. Even if my father was guilty, I haven't an idea who Morrison might be. And I gave Mr. Koslovsky the names of every one of my father's friends and acquaintances who, even with a degree of disguise, could have fitted the Morrison description. All the big men, that is. I even included the mayor of Freeland. And Mr. Starlock."

I laughed at that, and then we talked about other things until it was almost five and then took her home. She wouldn't let me take her as far as her room, though; she insisted that she had to start on her hair right away or it would never be dry in time.

I considered trying to phone Koslovsky again and keeping on trying at intervals until I got him, and then decided against it. I thought he might find Wanda's revised story about the letter more believable if he got it from her cold, without my having given it to him secondhand in advance of seeing her. And there was nothing else new worth reporting.

I killed the evening in various irrelevant ways and got to bed by midnight, and that was Sunday.

Monday I lit a fuse that caused a murder, then another one that blew the whole case wide open.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I got down to the office about ten minutes late and Uncle Am was already there, at his desk, just starting to make out a report in longhand.

"Hi," I said. "Finish your case for the supermarkets?"

"Yeah. And I just talked to our client and reported but he wants a written report for his files, damn him." Uncle Am hates paperwork.

"Get anything on the guy, the assistant manager?"

"The opposite. Clean bill of health. Found out plenty about him and all good. He wouldn't possibly be tied in with a burglary gang, so if the burglars did have the combination they got it some other way." He put down his pen. "Well, at least there's no hurry on this; I can do it any time. How've you been doing?"

I sat down and gave him a quick sketch of what I'd learned since I'd last seen him. He said, "Nice going, kid, you left out one thing. Where did you sleep Saturday night, or Sunday morning?"

I told him it was none of his business and he grinned and picked up his pen again. I suppose, to be a gentleman, I should have lied to him, but it wouldn't have done any good. If he hadn't known right off that I was lying, he'd have known it the next time he saw Wanda and me together, and I hoped that would be often.

I went to the typewriter desk in the outer office and pulled paper into the machine. I might as well get going on my next report for Koslovsky, even though I'd see he didn't get it until after Wanda had had a chance to talk to him. I wrote a few lines and then decided I wanted to think instead. I wasn't sure what I wanted to think about but I wanted to think. I thought about half an hour.

Then I went back and sat across from Uncle Am again. He put down his pen. "Well, Ed?"

I said, "We're not sure John Sohl has any connection with our case, except an accidental one. We're not sure Blackie has any connection either; it could be accident he moved into the rooming house right after Wanda did and that he was with her when her room was frisked. But they're both hoods—or at least Blackie was one until he reformed recently, if he really did. They both live in downtown Chi. Wouldn't it be interesting to know if they know one another? If they do, I'd say it's odds on they're both involved, regardless of who's working for whom."

"Sure, Ed. And what's to lose but a phone call for a try at finding out. You

can imitate Blackie's voice well enough to get by over the phone; just pitch your voice a little lower and put a touch of growl into it. Phone Sohl, say 'This is Blackie.' And see whether he says 'Who?' or 'Hi.' "

It made sense, but I didn't try it cold. First I spent about ten minutes trying to talk like Blackie until Uncle Am, who has a good ear for voices, told me I had it pat. Then I looked up the number of the Worth Hotel and dialed it. I asked for John Sohl and waited half a minute, presumably while the operator rang a room, and then a voice said "Yeah?"

It was a high-pitched, rather unusual voice, and I decided it would be safe to pretend to recognize it without having to ask "Sohl?" or "John" or "Johnny?" since I didn't know which one Blackie would use. I growled, "This is Blackie."

"About time. Got something for me?"

"Maybe," I said. "Come on around." And hung up.

Uncle Am said, "Sohl knows Blackie—or at least a Blackie. But why the 'Come on around' part? He'll find out that much sooner that the call was a phony."

"Sure," I said. "Not only that but he'll spoil Blackie's beauty sleep; he can't have been in bed more than five hours. So they find out the call was phony—or else each of them thinks the other is lying and they quarrel. And whether they get scared or mad, somebody might make a mistake or do something foolish. And that's what we need, for somebody to do something. Everybody in this case has been sitting tight since we started on it."

I went back to the typewriter desk and tried to think some more. To figure what it meant that Sohl knew Blackie, how it could fit into a pattern. But I couldn't get anywhere; there were still too many missing pieces and I couldn't even imagine what they were. I sweated maybe twenty minutes and then suddenly I saw, not the answers to any of the questions, but what a damn fool I was being.

I rushed to the door of the inner office and said, "Uncle Am, grab your hat. We're missing a boat. We should be on Covent Place, damn it. Come on."

In the elevator I said, "Maybe we'll beat him there yet. Even, if he drives or takes a cab, he's got to go through the Loop."

"Sure," Uncle Am said. "And maybe he didn't leave the minute you hung up. Guys like that usually sleep late. Maybe you woke him up and he wasn't dressed. I think we'll make it."

We wasted five minutes trying to flag a cab and then decided we'd get there quicker by walking. Uncle Am asked, "We both going in your room?"

"I've got a better idea," I told him. "I'll go in to see what I can hear—it might be plenty if they raise their voices. Anyway I'll know when he comes and leaves. You stay outside across the street and tail him when he leaves. Of course if he goes back to the hotel it won't tell us anything, but if he goes somewhere else it might."

"We don't know what he looks like, Ed. I could tail the wrong guy. Can

you tip me off some way?"

"Sure. When he leaves I'll follow him out. Whichever way he turns I'll go the opposite so he won't think I'm following him. But that'll tip you off and you can take it from there. I'll go back to the office and wait till I hear from you."

But as soon as we turned into Covent Place we knew we were too late; there were cop cars in front of the rooming house. We hurried up and both of us went in.

There were people and cops in the hall and the door of Blackie's room was open. I started for it and a cop stopped me, but I was close enough so I could see over his shoulder into the room. There were cops in there too—and one of them was Frank Bassett, our best friend in homicide.

Blackie was there too, but he was lying on his back across the bed, dressed only in a pair of shorts. There was a bullet hole in his bare chest, right over his heart, and a powder burn around it. The shot had been at very close range, almost contact.

I called out "Frank!" He turned and saw me and came out. When he said, "Hi, Ed. Hi, Am," the cop who'd stopped me stepped out of the way. "You guys know anything about this?"

"A lot," I said. "But let's get out of this hassle. I've got the next room there." I went to the door of my room, unlocked it and went in, and Bassett and Uncle Am followed me.

Inside, I said, "Listen, Frank, we know plenty but it'll take time to tell. You can tell us what happened here in one minute, so you go first."

Most cops won't give you the time of day till they've turned you inside out first, but Bassett is reasonable and saw my point.

He said, "It happened—" He glanced at his watch. "Fifteen minutes ago. We've been here five. Two people on this floor heard the shot and got their doors open in time to see the killer. The landlady and one roomer. He was running for the outer door when they saw him. Still had the gun in his hand but was putting it into his pocket as he ran.

"Not too much description—young, tall, blond. But when he turned outside, the landlady got a profile view of his face and says she can identify him. Does the description, such as it is, mean anything to you?"

"Not the description," I said. "Because we've never seen the guy. But we can give you his name and address if that'll help. John Sohl, Worth Hotel. And he was the driver of the car that killed Jason Rogers out in Freeland. And Blackie—"

"Hold it," he said. "With name and address let me start the machinery."

We went out into the hall and toward the phone. I said, "Hold the fort, Uncle Am. I'll be back in a couple of minutes. If Bassett gets back before I do, keep him amused."

I went past Bassett, who was dialing, and up the stairs. I knocked on Wanda's door. I had to knock a second time and when she opened the door, in

a robe, she still looked half asleep, so I knew that she'd slept through the shot and the excitement.

I said, "Sorry to wake you, Wanda, but it's important. Let me in a minute." She said, "Sure, Ed," and stepped back. I went in and closed the door behind me.

I said, "I want to stay only a minute so I'll talk fast. The case is beginning to break open. John Sohl just killed Blackie. That indicates they're both tied in with the Freeland deal and it also means that your father's death was probably murder.

I want you to stay here so I'll know where you are and can get in touch with you any time I want. Don't call Koslovsky. That business about your father's letter to you isn't important right now. And may never matter at all, if they catch Sohl and can make him talk. 'By now.' I leaned forward and kissed her lightly, and left.

Bassett was still talking on the phone when I passed him. I didn't think he'd noticed me either going or coming and he hadn't. Not that it mattered, but it would be less thing I'd have to explain. I was telling Uncle Am what I'd told Wanda to do when he came in and I broke off.

I said, "Sit down, Frank. This is going to take some time."

I gave him a rough outline of things first and even that a lot of talking. Then when I went back and started to fill in details he said, "Hold it, Ed. That's enough to go on and I don't want to listen to you the rest of the morning. I want to concentrate on Sohl and supervise the manhunt personally. I'll get all these details from you after we've got him."

"Swell," I said. "We'll go back to the office. You call us if you get Sohl and tell us where to meet you. Preferably wherever he'll be being questioned."

Bassett said he'd do that, and we left. This time, since we weren't in any hurry, an empty cab came along and we took it. In the cab I said, "Damn. What a bonehead stunt I pulled in not thinking of heading for Covent the minute I hung up that phone. I'd have been in my room; I'd have heard whatever they said if there'd been a quarrel before the shooting. And you'd have been outside, set to follow him when he came out—and the police wouldn't be looking for him now; they wouldn't have to be."

Uncle Am grunted. "Kid, that was the luckiest bonehead stunt we ever pulled. If you'd been listening in your room when that shot came, your door would have been the first to pop open—and it's between Blackie's door and the outside door. And he came out with a gun in his hand. Even if you hadn't been fool enough to try to stop him he might have shot you, just because you'd have seen him full face and close up; he'd have known you could identify him. If you'd been in your room when he shot Blackie, you might be with Blackie."

"There's that," I admitted.

When we got back to the office Uncle Am said he felt too keyed up to go back to his work on the report on the supermarket deal, so how about some

gin rummy? We tried gin rummy, but neither of us could concentrate on the cards. Halfway through, we gave up and quit; we tore up the score.

I paced. My mind was going in circles. Then suddenly a few of the circles intersected. I stood upon a peak in Darien, with a wild surmise. I sat on a corner of Uncle Am's desk and said, "Uncle Am, I've got a wild surmise."

"Surmise ahead," he told me.

"I want one more thing, if I can get it," I told him. "You've got Cavallo's unlisted phone number. Call it. You can tell him he'd better start looking for a new doorman for the Gray Goose, but that's incidental. He was going to try to find out things about Blackie for us. Ask him if he happened to find out where Blackie was born."

"Kid, what the hell could that—Oh, all right." He picked up the phone and dialed. And then talked a while and put it down.

He said, "Yeah, he talked to a few people about Blackie and didn't learn anything he thought was important enough to call us about. But one of them did happen to remember that Blackie once told him where he was born—or anyway where he came from."

I glared at him.

He said, "Milwaukee."

I let out the breath I'd been holding and sat down in the chair across from him.

I said, "My surmise is not too wild, then. Wilbur Schwarz was also from Milwaukee, born and raised there, his wife told me. And she also happened to mention that he has a 'cute little brother' named Julius. Julius is pretty close to Jules, and I think 'cute little' is just the way Mrs. Schwarz would think of Blackie, if she knew him as Julius Schwarz, Wilbur's younger brother."

"Maybe, but—"

I said, "In the words of Frank Bassett, hold it. I haven't finished. The word schwarz in German means black. Anyone raised in Milwaukee, a German town, and named Schwarz would know that, would have been told that, even if he didn't speak any German himself. And if Julius or wanted to change his name when he came from Milwaukee to Chicago, what's easier than to translate it? And he never did like Julius as a first name. I wouldn't like it myself unless my last name was Caesar. Or if he didn't change it sooner, it's just about what he'd have thought of to give the first time he was arrested if he wanted 'to give a false name. And after that, with his prints on record, he'd have to keep it. Uncle Am, I'll give you ten to one that Jules Black, alias Blackie, was once named Julius Schwarz, and is Wilbur's younger brother. Ten to one in bucks or sawbucks, and in money, not on the gin rummy account."

Uncle Am said, "Jesus." Not exactly reverently, but not exactly profanely either.

I said, "Uncle Am, I know how we can light another fuse and blow this case sky high. If we do it today. Schwarz can't possibly know Blackie's dead,

or learn it till he reads the evening papers. And we don't know whether learning that will make him run or decide it's safe for him to sit tight a while longer.

"But if I phone him at his office, using Blackie's voice like I did on Sohl, I can say, in effect, 'This is Blackie—' No, if Mrs. Schwarz calls him Julius, that's what Wilbur calls him. 'This Julius. The cops have got Sohl and he must have blown the whistle because I got a tip-off they're looking for me. So I can't go home; they'll be there. We better lam fast.'

"Only first we'd phone Koslovsky, give him a chance to stake out the city hall with cops to follow Schwarz when he leaves. Plainclothes cops who could tail him, of course. He'll head right for the money, wherever it's stashed, and then they can pick him up."

"Kid, it might work. At least call Koslovsky and suggest it, see if he'll go along with the idea. Hell, you should have called him half an hour ago anyway, the minute we got back here, to tell him about the murder."

I called Koslovsky. I told him about the murder first. Then about my wild surmise and the reasons for it. And then about my idea for scaring Schwarz into heading for the money.

He said, "Let me think a minute." I did, and then he said, "All right, try it. There's nothing to lose. If you're wrong about Schwarz the call will puzzle him instead of scaring him, but that won't hurt anything. Soon as I've got the stakeout set I'll phone and give you the go-ahead. You're at Starlock's office?"

"No," I said. "Call me at—" And gave him our number.

Uncle Am said, "Wait a minute, Ed. Let me talk to him." So I said "Just a minute" to Koslovsky and handed the phone over.

Uncle Am said, "This is Ambrose Hunter, Mr. Koslovsky. Remember me?... Yeah... No, Ed's not my son; he's my nephew. Listen, I've worked on some angles of this case with Ed and I'd like one of us to be in on the kill. Can you hold off till I get out there? ... Fine, thanks."

He hung up and told me, "He'll wait for me if I take a cab. Says it'll take him that long to get things set anyway. I'm to meet him across the street from the main entrance of the city hall; he and I will cover that."

He went for his hat. I said, "You never mentioned you knew Koslovsky."

"No reason to. Yes, I worked with him on a job or two while we were with Starlock. So long, kid."

I waited, and when it began to get near noon, I began to get impatient. Schwarz might start his lunch hour at twelve and if he did, the deal would have to wait until he got back, an hour lost.

The phone rang. But it wasn't a call from Freeland; it was Frank Bassett. He said, "No, we haven't got Sohl. But something else that might interest you. I had a team search Black's room. They found two thousand dollars—twenty hundreds—hidden, and pretty well hidden. Give you any ideas?"

"No, Frank," I said, "but thanks a lot for calling. Ill think about it and see if

I can fit it in. Call you back if I do. You at headquarters?"

"Yeah, I'm spreading the net from here. Okay, Ed. So long."

I did have an idea what that two thousand meant, but I didn't want to tell him just then because I didn't want to tie up the phone. And for the same reason, doubled in spades, I didn't want to tell him what was going on out in Freeland.

But I thought that two thousand explained Sohl's motive in killing Blackie. It was probably money Schwarz had given Blackie to give Sohl, Sohl's payoff for killing Jason Rogers. But Blackie hadn't paid it; he'd stalled Sohl along. He figured that if he stalled long enough, until he and Wilbur were ready to lam out, he'd be two grand ahead. Two grand even Wilbur wouldn't know about, and in addition to his cut of the main chunk of swag.

The first thing Sohl had asked when I'd identified myself to him as Blackie was "Got something for me?" And he'd sounded mad about it, and I'd answered "Maybe." And Sohl was fed up and not willing to take another stall; he'd taken a gun with him when he'd gone to see what "maybe" meant. And when Blackie had not only denied making the call but had stalled again when he demanded the money, Sohl had pulled the gun and shot Blackie.

Correction. No sane man shoots another in cold blood when he has something to lose, nothing to gain. Sohl Would have pulled the gun on Blackie, told him to fork over or else. And Blackie, in the pride of his strength and reflexes and probably in his contempt for Sohl's, had grabbed for the gun. Blackie's mistake.

That's the way it must have been, and my "maybe" had started it. If I'd said "yes" Sohl probably wouldn't have taken a gun. If I'd said "no," it's at least possible he wouldn't even have gone.

But if that's the way it had happened, and the reason for which it had happened, I could deduce another fact or two. Sohl hadn't been an integral part of the conspiracy, in for a percentage cut. He'd been hired by Blackie to do a specific job for a specified price. And he didn't know the score. He didn't know whom Blackie was working with or whom Blackie was working for. Otherwise, after being stalled that long, he'd have gone over Blackie's head and demanded his payoff from Schwarz. Also if Sohl had known Schwarz, and the score, Blackie wouldn't have dared try to stall him, for he'd have known that Sohl would have done just that. And Schwarz, having already given Sohl's payoff money to Blackie, would have known that Blackie had been chiseling and thereby endangering the whole operation, so Blackie would never have tried dragging down if Sohl had known Schwarz.

The phone rang. It wasn't Koslovsky, but it was Uncle Am. He said, "Okay, Ed, go ahead. Deal 'em down and dirty."

I got the treasurer's office through the Freeland operator and asked for Mr. Schwarz. Half a minute later Schwarz's voice said, "Schwarz speaking."

I growled, "This is Julius. The cops have got Sohl. And he must of blown the whistle on me because..."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

And when I finished, I waited. And sweated a little. If he hadn't answered yet because he was wondering what the hell I was talking about—

Then he said, "Where are you?" And I knew that I was in.

"Cigar store in the Loop," I said. "But I can't wait here for a call-back. I got to get out of sight."

"Okay. I'll meet you. In a couple of hours; it'll take me that long. You know where."

"Yeah," I said. And hung up while I was ahead, before he asked me anything I might not be able to answer. Of course I didn't know where, but nothing could matter less. He'd never get there. Neither, and for even stronger reasons, would Blackie.

I took a deep breath.

And then I started waiting. I considered phoning Bassett back, since I couldn't be getting a phone call right away in any case, and telling him the score. What I thought was the explanation of that two grand Blackie had had, what was happening in Freeland, and why I'd cut him short when he'd phoned me. Then I decided to hell with it; none of that information would help him find Sohl, and that was what he wanted to concentrate on and what I wanted him to concentrate on.

I waited and I waited. For over two hours. It was almost exactly two o'clock when the phone rang. It was Uncle Am again.

"Case closed, Ed. We got Schwarz, and the money. And he opened up like a book. Embezzlers always do when you catch them with the loot on them. Started babbling even on the way to the station. I could have called you sooner but I wanted to listen in while he did the talking and not miss anything."

"Swell," I said.

"Something sweller. With all the loot recovered, Koslovsky says a thousand-buck bonus. He still thinks we're with Starlock, of course, and he'll send it that way. But Ben's honest. He'll turn it over to you. Most of it, anyway. He might figure he deserves a slice."

"Not to me," I said. "To Hunter and Hunter, agency take. But since we're that rich, take a cab in. And listen, I'll phone Wanda and—hey, let's all three meet at Tom, Dick, and Harry's."

"Sure."

"Wait a minute. Well get there well before you do, and I might as well have

a start at telling all to Wanda. Give me some of the high lights.”

He gave me some of the high lights. And then I called Wanda and told her where to meet me and not to let any grass grow under her feet getting there. And I told her that All Was Well, but that she'd have to wait for the story; I wasn't going even to start it over the phone.

I got there only half a minute before she did and I'd taken a booth for us but I hadn't ordered yet. I asked her if fl highball would be all right.

She said, "I'm a little hungry, Ed, and you said they had good sandwiches here. Could I have one first?"

"I'm hungry too," I told her. "But I don't want to talk around a sandwich. And Uncle Am will be hungry when he gets here. Can you wait a while, till we get the talking over with? Then we can all three have lunch together, a nice big lunch."

She said all right, so I ordered us highballs, and then dived in.

I said, "I'll start at the beginning. The beginning was ten months ago, when the embezzlements started. And Whittaker, your father's previous assistant worked out the system and started them—the checks going out to a mythical construction company on forged orders-to-pay put in With genuine ones that came in from the Streets and Highways Department, and sent to a post-office address.

"When he got the first one he opened the Ralph Morrison account with it—yes, there were two Ralph Morrisons and I'll get to the second one later. Remember the new accounts clerk, shown a photograph of Whittaker said he could have been Morrison but that she couldn't be positive. Which isn't strange since she saw him only once and that once nine months before she was shown the photograph. And he never went back to the bank; he banked the subsequent Midwest checks by mail and had intended to let them accumulate and close out the account all at once when he was ready to run. But five months later he died of a heart attack at the office and that ended his part in the matter.

"A week or so later Schwarz took over his job and his desk. And on his second day there he found a big manila envelope in the desk file. It had been in a compartment marked 'Stationery' and hadn't been noticed or opened by whoever had cleared Whittaker's personal effects out of the desk.

"Schwarz opened the envelope and found some damned interesting things in it. There was a rubber stamp of the size used for endorsing checks that read Midwest Construction Company. There was a receipt for a post-office box rented for a year and the key to that box. Most interesting was a set of four monthly bank statements—still in their envelopes so he knew they'd been mailed to the P.O. box. They showed a series of deposits—and no withdrawals—showing that the Midwest Company had a total account of slightly over twenty-seven thousand bucks. Also a set of the receipts banks send out for deposits made by mail, and they covered all deposits shown except the first, so he knew that 'Morrison' hadn't been in the bank since he opened the

account five months before. For lagniappe, there were items of identification for a Ralph Morrison, several things, including a perfectly genuine driver's license; Whittaker had applied for and got one under that name. He wouldn't have needed, probably, to show identification to open the account but might have been asked for it when he got around to drawing against the account or closing it out, and he'd been ready.

"The driver's license had a physical description—height, weight, age, color of hair and so on. And by casually asking the chief clerk what Whittaker had looked like he found it fitted and knew that Whittaker himself had been Morrison and hadn't worked with an accomplice.

"And it was easy for him to find in the office files the cancelled and returned Midwest checks—each endorsed by Morrison under the Midwest rubber stamp, so he had a signature to copy. And clipped to each check was an order-to-pay form purporting to have been made out by the Streets and Highways Department. So he had every detail of Whittaker's operation and everything he needed to carry it on and swell that bank account as much as he could.

"But it wasn't going to do him any good to carry it on unless he could get the money out of the bank. He couldn't pretend to be Morrison himself, even though the tellers there would never have seen Morrison, for a simple reason. By sheer bad luck he'd opened his own checking account at that particular bank the week before and was known thereby his right name.

"So—Blackie. Blackie was twenty years younger than Whittaker had been, but he was almost exactly right in height and weight. And a gray wig would not only take care of hair color but would make him look older, and so would a few simple lines on his face made with a make-up pencil. Besides, who could he trust better than his own brother?

"So he took Blackie into the deal—on a one-third basis. But he didn't want Blackie quitting his job or drawing attention by suddenly spending money so he insisted that all the money, as Blackie drew it, was to be turned over to him. He'd give Blackie his split when the operation ended and they'd lam together. So he made out the checks to cash, forging the Morrison signature, and Blackie made the trips to the bank. And he figured he might as well keep on until just before the next audit and swell the take as much as he reasonably could. All clear so far?"

"Yes, Ed."

"Then a wheel came off, the day of your father's death—your father's murder—something, and we'll never know what, drew his attention to those Midwest checks. And he took them all out of the file, with the Streets and Highways order clipped to each, and took them home to study. He knew something was wrong, but hadn't yet decided what. He probably suspected that the shenanigans were in the other department, but he wanted to study things out before he made an accusation. He probably didn't suspect Schwarz as yet because some, in fact most, of the checks had been issued before

Schwarz had started in the job.

“So Schwarz called in Blackie and made a quick plan to have your father killed. Uncle Am didn’t tell me just how that was worked, so we’ll let that wait till he gets here. And then—”

“But, Ed, why? Why did he think he had to kill my father? By then the Morrison account had been drawn down to a few hundred dollars, so he already had the money. And he was going to have to run soon anyway—before the routine audit. Why didn’t he just run sooner? Before Dad figured things out.”

“The cast,” I said. “That’s where Schwarz’s completely genuine accident was a factor. He had on a big cast, not only on his arm but up over his shoulder, a particularly conspicuous cast. He couldn’t have run and had a Chinaman’s chance of getting away with it. No matter where he went or how he traveled he’d have stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. And, that soon after his accident, he couldn’t possibly have taken it off; he’d probably have had a crippled arm and shoulder for the rest of his life, and that too would have marked him. So he took a desperate chance to stall things and it worked for him—until today.”

I looked at her. “Tell me, Wanda, did you destroy those checks and papers? You must have.”

Her face flushed. “Yes, I did. At the same time I destroyed the letter about a bequest to Mrs. Agnew. I found them in Dad’s desk, and they were from the office and, being checks, they seemed like something he shouldn’t have brought home.

“I guess I wasn’t thinking straight; I’d had two shocks so close together. First his death and then the accusations against him. I’m afraid my first thought, when I found those things, was that maybe he really was guilty and those things would prove that he was. It wasn’t until later, when I’d had time to think, that I realized how ridiculous it had been for me to think that. And by then it was too late. Admitting I’d found and destroyed them would have made the case against him just that much blacker. Tell me, if I’d turned them over to the police, would they have cleared him?”

I said, “They might have. Schwarz probably did a good job of forging Whittaker’s Morrison signature; it got by at the bank. Ditto any writing or signatures that would have been on the order-to-pay forms. But if a handwriting expert had studied them he might have come up with the fact that one man had written those dated before Whittaker’s death, another those dated after. And that would have put the police on the right track, right away. Here comes Uncle Am.”

He came up grinning. Wanda moved over and he slid in beside her. “How much have you told her?”

“Just about everything you told me on the phone. Take it from there.”

“Okay, I’ll start with the pick-up. Schwarz came out right after your phone call. The front way, so Koslovsky and I got him. We broke up. Since Schwarz

didn't know me, I took a short tail, Koslovsky stayed back, keeping me in between. First Schwarz stopped in a hardware store, came out with a package. Then he went to a hotel and checked in, went up to his room and stayed half an hour, then came down. Without either the package or the cast; he'd got tools, of course, to take it off. Must have been awkward, but he'd managed it.

"Then he went to a bank and to a safe deposit vault. When he came out of there he had a different package, and a sizable one. Forty-some thousand dollars in assorted bills, none larger than hundreds, makes quite a bundle. Koslovsky and I grabbed him. Technically, it was Koslovsky who arrested him; Koslovsky's a deputy, carries a star. And, as I told you, he started babbling even before we got him to the station. And that's that end of it. But before I go on, Ed, did Bassett call back while you were at the office? Have they got Sohl?"

I said, "Yes to the first question, no to the second." And I told them about two thousand dollars having been found in Blackie's room, and the guess I was making, from that fact, as to Sohl's motive for having taken a gun when he went to see Blackie and how Blackie's death had happened.

Uncle Am nodded. "Probably right, kid, down the line, except for one minor correction. Schwarz had given Blackie three thousand to give Sohl; that was supposed to be his payoff. Blackie must have given him a grand, stalled him on the other two."

"Makes more sense that way," I said. "If Sohl actually got one grand in cash, I can see his taking the stall as long as he did. If he hadn't got any money, he'd have called on Blackie with a gun a lot sooner. Okay, go ahead. How was the murder worked?"

"Damn well for a spur-of-the-moment operation. Schwarz planned and master-minded it, of course. Blackie and Sohl went out to Freeland in separate cars. Blackie rented one and Sohl used his own. They were to be in their places before eight o'clock. Blackie was parked across the street from the point at which Rogers was killed, facing east. Sohl was parked on the other side of the street and heading the other way, beyond the Rogers house.

"At eight on the head Schwarz phoned Rogers. He said he had something important to talk to him about and wondered if Rogers could drop over for a moment. He said he'd walk over to the Rogers house but his shoulder was painin' him—reasonable, that shortly after his accident, even though he'd already returned to work. And of course Rogers said yes, he'd come over. Rogers probably figured that Schwarz too had come across something irregular or unusual at the office and that that was what he wanted to talk about. And he knew Rogers would walk, for so short a distance, since he didn't drive a car himself, rather than ask his daughter to chauffeur him. As, of course, he did—or started out to do."

"Wait a minute," I said. "How could he have known Rogers wouldn't tell Wanda where he was going?"

"He didn't. He thought he probably would—as he probably really would

have done if Wanda had happened to be in the house and had heard the phone call, instead of being in the garage. But it wouldn't have mattered. If he had told Wanda where he was going, Schwarz would have had some perfectly good reason to tell afterwards why he'd called Rogers and what he'd wanted to talk to him about. As it happened, he got a break.

"When he came out and started toward Schwarz's—and there was only one way he could have walked there—Sohl started his car and crawled it along just about the right distance between him, and without lights. When Rogers got to the point opposite where Blackie was parked, Blackie called out to him—by name. Even Schwarz doesn't know exactly what Blackie said or asked, but it was something that got Rogers to start across the street toward Blackie's car to see who Blackie was and what he wanted. And when he was far enough from the curb Sohl gunned his engine and flashed on his lights to blind Rogers and was going at least thirty when he hit him. And it worked out perfectly—or almost perfectly. It was supposed to be a hit-run accident. But the impact, or the wheels of Sohl's car running over the body, jerked the wheel out of his hands and he crashed into the tree. Only Blackie took off, instead of both of them, but Blackie took off quickly enough and fast enough so he was around a corner and out of sight by the time Wilkins had run out of the house. Yes, Mrs. Wilkins *did* hear another car, after the sound of the crash; it was Blackie's taking off. And Blackie, since he didn't have to be at work until nine, got there in time.

"Is there anything else? Oh, yes, the burglaries. Or the burglary of the house and the searching of your room, Wanda. Schwarz knew Rogers had taken home those checks and other papers and, if he could get them so he could destroy them, he'd be better off. Maybe they wouldn't exactly have implicated him but they'd have thrown some suspicion

He turned to Wanda. "Wanda, do I have to ask you what happened to those checks and papers? Or have you already told Ed?"

I said quickly, "She's already told me. Go on."

"It was Blackie who burglarized your house, the first day you happened to be going to be gone any length of time—and of course Schwarz didn't know the police had searched the day before. But—we didn't happen to ask Schwarz this—was there any way he could have known you'd be gone all or almost all of that day?"

Wanda nodded. "The first place I stopped that day was at Dad's office. I didn't see Schwarz, but I talked with Mr. Tinsley, the chief clerk; I knew him fairly well. I asked him for suggestions as to places I should go, people I should see, to look for a job. And he knew I'd be doing those things all day. He could have mentioned my having been there, and the rest of it, to Wilbur Schwarz."

"And it was Sohl who went through your room, Wanda, after Blackie had moved in on you, and while he took you to a show to make sure you'd be away. That was shortly enough after the original deal so Sohl wasn't really

mad at Blackie for not having given him all of the money yet.”

I said, “That accounts for the difference in techniques between the burglary of the house and the search of Wanda’s room. But there’s one thing I don’t see, Uncle Am. If Wanda had found those checks and vouchers she’d either have turned them over to the police or destroyed them, wouldn’t she? So, in case she hadn’t found them, I can see the reason for the burglary. But why search her room? If she had them by then, she’d have done one thing or the other with them, wouldn’t she? So why the search?”

“Schwarz was a careful guy, and there was a third possibility, Ed. She might have had them but have been doubtful. Afraid to turn them over in case they’d definitely implicate her father, close the case against him. Afraid to destroy them in case they might be something that would clear him. Waiting to learn more, to see which way the cat would jump. Well—I’m starving to death. Have you people eaten?”

We people hadn’t eaten and we were starving too. It was almost three o’clock and none of us had had lunch. We decided we wanted more than sandwiches and that we’d go to the nearest good restaurant. And we went there.

Uncle Am said, “Ed, you order for me. I’ll call Bassett; I’m curious about Sohl.”

So I ordered for him, something I knew he’d like, and he came back and sat down with us. “They’ve got Sohl,” he said. “Hasn’t talked yet, but it doesn’t matter. They’ve got him cold on both killings. The Freeland one, from Schwarz’s confession. Blackie’s, because he hadn’t even ditched the gun yet. A thirty-two with one chamber fired, one empty cartridge. Not to mention Mrs. Czerny’s being able to identify him. If they can’t fry him on one murder they will on the other. What did you order for me, Ed?”

“Fried pork chops. Okay?”

“Better if I hadn’t just talked about frying. Wanda, what are you going to do now? I mean, now that everything’s settled and the estate is yours and all that.”

She said she was going to take her time making up her mind. Now that the estate would be unblocked and she could draw money against it she wouldn’t be pressed for quick cash and didn’t think she wanted to go on being a cigarette girl; it just wasn’t her type of work and there was no future in it. She’d give Mr. Cavallo, of course, as much notice as he needed to find another girl. On the other hand she didn’t think she wanted to go back to college, try to catch up what she’d missed and go on. The course she’d been taking would qualify her only to be a musician or a music teacher and she didn’t think she wanted to be either. She’d probably take her time finding her next job and, since starting salary wouldn’t matter much now, she’d look for that could lead to some career she’d like. We both agreed with her that that sounded sensible.

I had a thought and said, “One loose end. I still don’t see why Blackie

reacted so violently over my relations with Wanda, didn't want me to have dates with her. Even though he himself was treating her like a sister. Or, Wanda, did you exaggerate a little about that?"

Wanda shook her head. "No, it's true. He never tried to put his arm around me or kiss me."

Uncle Am said, "We'll never know, but we can guess. I'd guess it this way. He really did fall for Wanda, but with a worship-from-afar complex. Tough guys can have soft spots in some places and Wanda hit one of his. He put her on a pedestal, saw her as a goddess too pure and beautiful to be touched. Even by him, let alone by anyone else. So, whether you'd call it jealousy or protectiveness or a mixture of both—"

He shrugged and stopped talking as the waiter started to bring our food. We ate till we were stuffed.

Then Uncle Am said, "Listen, I've got an idea. I promised Frank Bassett I'd come around and make a statement, fill him in on all the points he doesn't know yet. And he'll want to talk to you too, Ed, but I talked him into letting that go until tomorrow.

"So why don't you two celebrate? You've been talking about wanting to play together—piano and trombone, I mean. And there's a baby grand out at Freeland that's now again yours, Wanda. Why don't you two go out there and make music? Pick up a bottle on the way if there's no liquor there."

"There is some," Wanda said. "It sounds wonderful to me. Ed?"

I said it sounded considerably better than wonderful to me.

When we left the restaurant I flagged a cab. Wanda and I got in and I gave an order to the driver. But before he took off Uncle Am came to the curb and called out to us, "Have fun, kids. Ed, don't forget your trombone."

I laughed, and waited till the cab had turned a corner and was out of Uncle Am's sight before I leaned forward and changed my instructions to the driver, gave him Mrs. Brady's address and told him to stop there a minute before he took us on out to Freeland.

I had forgotten my trombone, or would have if Uncle Am hadn't reminded me. But I'd never tell him that.